



COVID-19 AND TURKEY'S SOFT POWER DIPLOMACY

Wikistrat's COVID-19 Webinar Series
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BACKGROUND

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, Turkey has used humanitarian aid as part of a soft power play to extend its international influence. Since mid-March, Turkey has sent medical supplies to Italy, Spain, and Britain, as well as countries in the Balkans and the Middle East. To understand the domestic and regional context of these soft power initiatives and their political implications for Turkey, Wikistrat interviewed Dr. Ahmet Erdi Öztürk, an expert on Turkish politics and foreign policy.



Dr. Ahmet Erdi Öztürk

Dr. Ahmet Erdi Öztürk is assistant professor of politics and international relations at London Metropolitan University. He is the author and co-author of more than 20 articles, three books, and four special issues on religion and modern Turkish politics.

KEY INSIGHTS

Ankara engages in the foreign aid competition in the absence of sufficient measures to address the crisis domestically: Turkey has helped Balkan countries through its transnational state apparatus, the TİKA, without enjoying sufficient economic solidity. Considering the relatively small amount of economic stimulus Erdoğan has planned to inject in the economy (approx. 2.5 billion USD), the Turkish economy is not strong enough to support its own people, and yet Ankara continues to send aid outside of its borders.

Medical aid provision is motivated by concerns of regional competition: Ankara started to send doctors and medical equipment to several Muslim-majority countries in Africa, where the numbers of cases are not particularly high. Erdoğan, right now, is again trying to define himself as a Muslim leader of what is still, on paper, a secular country. With the pandemic, a regional power competition has ensued between Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iran, and Egypt over who's going to be the next leader of the global ummah.

The country lacks a long-term vision to tackle the pandemic: Despite announcements from the government, Turkey doesn't have an accurate and solid plan, and it currently doesn't know what to do after the initial three months from the outburst. The government is not making very long-term plans, and this is true not just with regards to this current crisis.

Lack of domestic criticism of Ankara's foreign aid is explained by the increasing degree of repression: From the outside, the country's oxymoronic course of action may very well be evident, but it is extremely hard to question the government's modus operandi, as a presidential executive order issued in 29 March sanctions criticism of the government's COVID-19 response with fines or imprisonment. Despite the fact that the Turkish economy is shrinking, the national political discourse still very much revolves around the country's status as a significant actor in world politics, and so engages in feats that great powers engage in, namely foreign aid in this situation.

LIVE WEBINAR: FULL TRANSCRIPT

Wikistrat: Welcome to this Special Wikistrat Webinar on the impact of COVID-19 on Turkey's use of soft power diplomacy. We're very happy to have here today Dr. Ahmet Erdi Öztürk, lecturer in International Relations and Politics at London Metropolitan University and visiting scholar at the Department of Political Science and International Relations at the University of Birmingham. Erdi, starting with a general question, what kind of aid is Turkey sending in the framework of its COVID-19 diplomacy?

Öztürk: First of all, thank you for having me. It's a great opportunity for all of us to work and engage in intellectually challenging conversations from our homes, despite the gloomy global atmosphere. Before all of that, I would like to speak a little bit about the definition of soft power. I know almost all of us are experts on this issue, but over the last three days, I have been giving interviews, and from the comments and reactions on social media, what I realized is that people do not know what soft power means.

There is a huge confusion about the state's soft power, whether it is the soft power of the states, or it is the soft power of the nation, or of the leadership mechanisms. As we know, soft power was defined by Joseph Nye and then regulated and redefined many different times by

himself as well. But basically, soft power describes the use of positive attraction and pressures to achieve a country's foreign policy objectives. Soft power is quite different from hard power despite the fact that it adopts some of the hard power tools, including the economy and the other institutions, with the exclusion of military power of course.

Soft power mainly aims to transform and create a positive society in the minds of other nations. There are lots of good examples of soft power, such as the Swedish Institute, such as the German Education Centers, the United Kingdom university system.

Within this soft power area, Joseph Nye stated that a small country can combine, in a very good way, it's hard and soft power. I'm not sure whether Turkey was very much aware in the 1990s of having a soft power, but at the very beginning of the 2000s and at the very beginning of the AKP, Justice and Development Party period, the government realized that they could have a soft power.

What is that soft power? The optimum backgrounds? The quiet, moderate understanding of Islam for the Justice and Development Party to show the world how Islam and democracy can be

compatible. Turkey has instrumentalized its transnational state apparatus very wisely across the Balkan Peninsula, Turkey, Northern Africa, and even in Western Europe.

After 2013, the liberalization of the Turkish domestic politics, the shrinking economy conditions, and the increasing authoritarianism of Turkish leadership set back Turkey's soft power. But right now, what we have recently seen is that a new discussion has unfolded around the existence of a COVID-19 soft power.

What was the kickoff point of this new soft power? Chinese medical support to Italy and Russia's following attempts to come to the aid of some of the Eastern European countries or the Balkan countries such as Bulgaria, Serbia, Macedonia, and others. The United States then tried to show support for France and the United Kingdom. And lastly, Turkey tried to show support by sending medical equipment and masks and other necessary equipment, first to the Balkans, then Northern Africa, and finally to Italy, UK, and other Western countries.

Now, there is a huge discussion over whether this might be the return of Turkey to the soft power area. On the one hand, yes, I can say that it is so, but on the other, I have many big questions. My next book, which will be published in January 2021, claims that Turkey has been ambivalent in its demonstrations of soft power. It is impossible to define Turkey as a pure, very smart, and successful soft power because, in order to be a soft power, you have to be "successful" in one way or the other in some areas of domestic politics.

What does that mean? If a country wishes to be portrayed as a perfect democratic nation, it has to uphold the high standards of democratic values. If a country wishes to be portrayed as an educational powerhouse, it should be home to world-class universities and research institutes.

During the COVID-19 [pandemic], that should translate in these terms: in order to support other countries with some medical equipment, a country needs to be prepared itself to respond to the crisis. In order to financially aid other countries, like Turkey has helped Balkan countries through its transnational state apparatus, through the TIKA, a country should enjoy sufficient economic solidity.

Let me give you an example: when the British Government announced 300 billion GBP support to the United Kingdom's small and medium enterprises (SMEs), exactly the same day, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan only announced 14 billion Turkish Lira, which roughly equals 2 billion GBP, to support the Turkish economy because of the negative effect of COVID-19. That means that the Turkish economy is not strong enough to support its own people at home, and yet Ankara continues to send aid outside of its borders.

The other thing is that, if you would like to talk about Turkey's soft power in the COVID-19 era, we should consider the long-run perspective. But we still don't know that when this COVID-19 nightmare is going to end. It will be increasingly hard for Turkey to sustain this soft power competition.

Right now, the question should be: why has Turkey been engaging in all these activities despite its many different weaknesses

at home? The first answer may be global competition. Turkey, since 2011, pushed by the leadership desires of Davutoglu and Erdoğan, couldn't refrain from starting to compete with countries all around the world.

There are many different other factors, such as competition amongst Muslim countries, the weakness of the European Union, or Turkey's "New State Identity" [that are] very much important for understanding Turkey's joint activities right now.

Wikistrat: Erdi, thank you for that brilliant introductory opening to this webinar. Could you provide some examples of these expressions of soft power by Turkey nowadays? Does it consist of shipments of medical supplies, or does it entail sending medical teams? Which essential goods are being shipped by Turkey to other countries as part of its soft power endeavors?

Öztürk: Due to the current widespread international lockdown, transportation of goods here in the UK and all-around Europe has been stopped. Under these circumstances, there are only three ways to support other countries – that is by sending medical equipment, sending medical teams, and financial support, but it is hard to define financial support strictly as a soft power measure. Some countries, like the Norwegian Government which is helping Serbia to build a new hospital as we speak, seem to be engaging in more substantial forms of medical aid.

Wikistrat: Both China and Russia have also sent medical aid and personnel abroad to countries in need. In your assessment, is there a different international-relations

rationale behind Ankara's efforts?

Öztürk: There are similarities and differences. Russia, China, Turkey, the US, and most of the other states have been claiming to be the leading actors in every single issue in world politics, whereas now they are struggling.

So, Turkey will try to be a leading actor, or at least a reasonable actor. Likewise, China, likewise Russia and all of the "strong, influential countries." This is one common point.

Another common point is leadership mechanisms, still are the personality of the leaders put in the change Erdoğan, the strong men of the world right now. With regards to the domestic politics of Turkey, I would say Erdoğan is not that strong at the moment, but at least he is trying to show himself as a strong man, who's trying to protect and support other people. He's imagining himself as that kind of a political figure. These are the similarities between the Turkish efforts and those of Russia and China.

What are the differences? The directions towards which Ankara has sent aid. The first Turkish efforts were directed towards Italy, which makes sense due to the country's very vulnerable situation. Then they chose to support the Balkans, then the Turkic countries, several North African countries like West Somalia, and also some Muslim-majority countries in Africa.

At this point, there are a couple of considerations to be made. The first thing is Turkey has been trying to become a big brother of the Balkans, trying to implant its "soft power" tools there, in the attempt to

become an influential actor in the region starting from 2007, stressing common heritage traits with regards to the language base, culture, and religion.

Turkey has activated many different elements in its transnational state apparatus within these regions such as Diyanet, the Yunus Emre Institution, and TIKA, among other institutions. It is easy for Turkey to help these regions because Turkey has been there for ages and Ankara has been, as agencies and actors present in the region, making up this transnational status apparatus. It was thus quite easy for Turkey to support these regions, which are very tiny, actually. Macedonia, for example, is just like 2.5 million people. The population and geographical proximity were decisive factors.

Beyond that, Turkey realized that, because of many different issues, but mainly due to the inner politics and the bureaucratic structure of the European Union, the supranational body couldn't act very quickly to support the Balkan Peninsula. For example, the Serbian Prime Minister announced that, even though the country is host to several different investments projects from the European Union, Brussels decided to combat the pandemic as a united European bloc and Serbia, as an accession country, found itself excluded from that, obtaining the main support from China, Russia, and Turkey. Amidst lack of timely action from the European Union, Turkey, therefore, found this gap and attempted to fill it.

Aid towards the Turkic countries has been mainly motivated by the common nationality, Erdoğan has been trying to be a very nationalist leader. In light of the

unwritten coalition between the Nationalist Party in Turkey and Erdoğan, he has converted himself as the flag holder of the new Turkish nationalism at home.

And as one part of a reflection of this, actually, it's very easy to assume that they helped the Turkic countries. But Northern Africa finds itself in a very tricky situation right now. Turkey has been using different soft power tools to influence Somalian politics through many different humanitarian aid missions, among other means of collaboration.

Ankara started to send doctors and medical equipment to some Muslim-majority countries in Africa, where the numbers of cases are not particularly high. I ask, what was the main aim? There hasn't been widespread coverage of this, [but] it is being debated across the academic community, with some op-eds on the New York Times and The Guardian. The pandemic has ensued a regional power competition between Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iran, and Egypt over who's going to be the next leader of the global Ummah. Erdoğan, right now, is again trying to define himself as a Muslim leader, even though Turkey is still, on paper, a constitutionally secular Muslim-majority country. A huge discussion ensued across Turkish society whether the country should be secular or not, polarizing the national political debate. Erdoğan has nonetheless moved to describe himself as a Muslim political leader.

The last point is that the overwhelming majority of Turkish media outlets, currently very aligned with the lines of the Justice and Development Party, has been describing the pandemic as the beginning

of the end for the Western world. While the United States and the United Kingdom face unprecedented difficulties, Turkey is considerably well-positioned to fight the health crisis thanks to the powerful Erdoğan, who is not just able to direct the country out of the crisis but has also found the resources to send support to others, including powerful and influential European leaders, like Great Britain and Italy. The current narrative thus reinforces Ankara's role as a great influential power who can come to the rescue of other major powers. This is a great example of the strong personalization of the state identity.

The other issue is that, even though there is a general perception that Erdoğan seems to have a firm hold on the domestic political situation, I have read that Erdoğan's political journey has shown to be increasingly fragile, leading to questions over his vulnerability as a leader.

He's also trying to create a new leadership image during an exceptional situation. Erdoğan is a political animal, to use Aristotelian terminology. Right now, he's been instrumentalizing the current situation to portray himself as a very exceptional actor.

But [as to] whether all of these can be defined as a soft power, my answer is both yes and no. Turkey enjoys an ambivalent soft power because yes, indeed, supporting other countries, particularly vulnerable ones, is effectively engaging in the exercise of soft power. But this couldn't be a permanent activity.

The second thing is that it is important for one to have their domestic situation under control before rushing to help others. Soft

power's importance ultimately relies on obtaining a positive acknowledgment on behalf of the broader civil society you are helping. I currently live in the UK and I've been talking to friends, colleagues, and neighbors. No one knows anything about Turkish aid to the British government because it is not the priority right now and [is] thus barely significant.

Wikistrat: Therefore, who would you say is the target audience of these efforts?

Öztürk: The first target audience is the people of Turkey. No one knows what is going on in the UK. I'm not sure whether the Italian people are aware of Turkey's support. They might be aware, but I'm not sure whether Turkish support will change the ideas in the minds of Italians regarding the image of Turkey or the image of Erdoğan.

A week ago, a very bad example of crisis mismanagement occurred in Turkey when the Interior Minister announced the public lockdown just two hours before it came into effect, leading to mass gatherings due to last-minute massive panic buying, which occurred all across the country. These images made the front covers of newspapers in the UK, Germany, and France, along with the title "Corona Party".

The other audience is definitely the near geographies of Turkey, which has been a target audience for quite a long time. The Balkans, the Turkic countries, Northern Africa, and the Muslims because, as I said previously, there has been consistent competition going on between different Islamic sects and different understandings of Islam, Wahhabi, Sunni, and Shia, and different countries such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, Egypt, Turkey. Even Morocco has

joined this competition right now. There is a huge competition [over] who's going to be the new visible leader or a big patron or a contemporary Khalif, of these global OMA Muslims. In short, Muslims are the third target audience for all these activities.

Wikistrat: Do you think that the positive impact of Turkey's aid diplomacy will go beyond the tactical level?

Öztürk: Indeed. Today the Foreign Minister, Mevlut Cavusoglu, defined that, after this pandemic, Turkey's foreign policy would be very based on tolerance as Turkey will try to support as many societies in the world as it can. But again, to support all of these countries, if Turkey tried to compete in humanitarian aid activities in the attempt of being visible in terms of soft power all around the world, Ankara should have a stable and powerful economic situation and should enjoy political stability at home. According to the IMF and the World Bank, Turkey's gross domestic product will shrink by more than 5% at the end of this year. After the currency crisis of 2018, Turkey's quite weak economically speaking right now. How a country in such conditions can be able to sustainably support all these initiatives remains an open question.

The other issue is that, in order to be a successful soft power implementer, a country should have a certain state identity. Currently, can we define the Turkish state identity? Is it nationalist or Islamist? The answer might be a bit of both, but it's hard to say exactly. Because there is always a changeable unconventional coalition that has been characterizing Turkish domestic politics.

There is an upcoming election in 2023, and we know that Erdoğan's success will

very much depend on the decisions of the Nationalist Party in Turkey. He has already lost most of the biggest municipalities in Turkey; it is going to be a difficult situation for him. I'm not sure whether Turkey's foreign aid commitments will be remembered after the pandemic and whether this strategy can be sustainable in the long run.

Wikistrat: How can Erdoğan afford to sustain these international endeavors to make Turkey look better if its economy is in such a weak situation?

Öztürk: From outside Turkey, this may appear as a quite straightforward matter. But for those living in the country right now, it might be very hard to question all of these issues. A presidential executive order was issued 12 days ago which sanctions criticism of the government response to COVID-19 with fines or imprisonment. Right now, Turkey is experiencing the harsh impositions of a competitive authoritarian regime. If your country is not eligible to support its citizens with the tax base and ask its own citizens to support the campaign, and then you're going to support the other countries without any question, yes, this is a very oxymoronic situation. But if you're going to question this issue, it might be a problem in Turkey.

Even though the Turkish economy is shrinking, and the country doesn't enjoy a perfectly defined national identity, Turkey surely doesn't portray itself this way. It has been claiming his status as a significant actor in world politics. Yes, Turkey can be a game-changer in many different areas, but when compared to others, I would say that Turkey is still a meek power. Turkey is not a superpower, but it's trying to act as such.

Wikistrat: Do you see a consistent approach in Turkey's COVID-19 foreign aid?

Öztürk: This is a very difficult question, actually. This COVID pandemic is a very exceptional situation, and it presents us with unprecedented issues to deal with. I would say that it won't be very hard for Turkey to create a consistent, sustainable COVID-19 support for other countries, but there might be some unforeseen circumstances because Turkey has been many different transnational state apparatuses in different countries, for example, Bosnia, Somalia, and Afghanistan. These agencies find themselves in a relatively better economic situation when considering the overall state of the Turkish economy.

I'm not sure whether Turkey will continue to support the United Kingdom, Italy, and all other major powers because it might be fine to send medical equipment, but forms of financial aid might be quite difficult for Turkey to sustain in the near future.

I don't know whether it's going to be sustainable or not, but I think that it would be very difficult for Turkey.

Wikistrat: Thank you so much, Erdi, for this fascinating discussion. We now open the floor to questions.

Larry: I've been privy to some off-the-record conversations with ministers and it seems that the government hasn't developed a comprehensive plan. Their idea is that they just want to see how it goes. I'm not sure whether the Wikipedia page on the 2020 coronavirus pandemic in Turkey is accurate, but it says that their daily increases of new cases have dropped down to under 6% now.

Öztürk: Regarding the data about new cases and the death toll, the data from the Turkish Health Ministry differs from the data of some civil society organizations. With regards to the death toll, we do not know whether every single death from the virus can be counted as a coronavirus death. Especially in the provinces, there is a tendency to avoid attributing some deaths of the elderly to the virus, considering them to be for factors other than COVID-19. We don't know whether the data is very reliable.

I would say, though, that despite the general overall decline of the Turkish state infrastructure, the public health system is much better than most Western societies, particularly compared to the UK and US. Doctors are quite capable of dealing with this and might turn this into a success story.

There is, indeed, a lack of panic, but this is true of most of the Western countries as well. There was some initial panic over shelf storage in supermarkets, but this is no longer the case. The Turkish media outlets have been trying to portray the situation abroad as worse than it is, and the situation at home, conversely, better than it actually is.

Robert: As you know Turkey has had aspirations and has taken measures to become a gas hub in the region. How have the circumstances regarding this ambition changed because of the coronavirus? How has it affected Turkey's general energy security situation?

Öztürk: My frank answer would be that I don't know. Currently, Recep Tayyip announced future plans in terms of energy, the will to find an agreement with Iran and Russia in Syria.

He also said that the petrol agreements with the Arab countries will continue as they currently are, during and after the pandemic. Despite the announcements, I do not know what's going to happen exactly with regards to Turkey's energy ambitions. I think Turkey doesn't have that accurate and solid plan, should this pandemic or this current, very dark, gloomy atmosphere continue for more than three months. The current region is not making very long-term plans. This is one of the characteristics of the regime, actually.

Wikistrat: Do you expect the Turkish Government to declare full lockdown during the pandemic if it gets worse?

Öztürk: I think they should do that, at least in Istanbul and Ankara, but I'm not sure the Turkish economy would be able to sustain the weight of a lockdown. For example, consider the UK, whose economy is much stronger than the Turkish one. If the lockdown continues like this in the UK for three months, only for a three-month period, the British economy will record the around 7% narrowing in its economy. The Turkish economy is not strong enough to sustain that.

And I'm not sure, I think Turkey will not try to do that if the situation will continue like that. But if the situation will be worsened, I'm not sure what's going to happen. But that kind of a lockdown could be very painful for Turkey in the long run.

Wikistrat: Do you see that Turkey will be able to leverage or to capitalize its success in these soft power efforts in the post-COVID era, in a sense of better relations with Italy, with EU countries more generally, and with African countries, being able to position

itself as a regional, economic, and political power able to provide some solutions to these countries' needs?

Öztürk: Well, since 2016, Turkey has been trying to diverge from the West and has changed its foreign policy orientation towards a Eurasianist worldview. It is also trying to change its state identity and behaviors. Because of that, even if Ankara continues to send help profusely, I'm not sure Turkey will create very strong and smooth relations with the European Union.

At the very beginning of the pandemic, as you may remember, Erdoğan went to Brussels and he walked out of the meeting with European leaders and European Union officials because of the migrant issue. The Turkish government's rhetoric has been critical of the latest regulations. Erdoğan's repressive behavior against the opposition is barely compatible with the values of the European Union. Beyond that, Turkey has been trying to compete indirectly in the European Union's spheres of influence, by attempting to fill the gaps that the EU has left in the Balkans since the pandemic has come around.

It would be quite difficult to create a good relationship with the European Union, but I can say more about the Balkans as my next book will be about the region. Turkey is a very strong leverage among the Muslim communities in the Balkan region. For example, during the earthquakes in 2015 and 2016 in Macedonia and Albania, Turkey sent little support to these countries. But right now, everyone has been speaking about the Turkey support, so Ankara's aid has definitely gained far more visibility in the region than anywhere else.

On the other hand, Germany has been sending lots of planes and financial support to the governments, but no one has been speaking about the German government's support. Turkey knows the region better than most of the countries – it has a better knowledge of the dynamics, and thus it will continue to leverage in the Balkan countries. And it's the same for the Turkey countries as well.

For Africa, I would say that every single country has its own dynamics. For Somalia, Turkey's like a legendary actor for Somalia. But I wouldn't say the same thing for Libya, Algeria, or Egypt. But I would say that there might not be a dramatic change,

be it positive or negative, regarding Turkey's image and its relations with other countries.

Wikistrat:

Thank you, everyone, for your great comments and participation and, of course, Erdi for these insightful observations and for the great discussion.

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