

# Turkey in Afghanistan

**A Successful Stakeholder, But a Difficult Partner**

*Cem Sey and Günter Seufert*

**The global increase in Islamist violence, state disintegration in Asia and Africa and the resulting influx of refugees to Europe are forcing the international community to intensify its focus on the promotion of peace in crisis regions and on social reconstruction. It may be useful to draw on the experiences in Afghanistan when responding to future challenges. Here, particular attention should be paid to Turkey, whose strategy and approach differ from those of other states, and whose involvement in Afghanistan is generally deemed successful. Simultaneously, the experiences gathered in Afghanistan also permit assertions to be made regarding Turkey as a partner in terms of security cooperation – a highly topical issue.**

Fourteen years after the start of the international mission in Afghanistan in 2002, overriding public opinion has it that the operation has, in general, been a failure. Although almost all military operations to combat the Taliban were crowned with success, it proved impossible to establish a stable political system, a functioning administration and an effective judiciary despite strenuous financial and personnel-related efforts. Moreover, a large proportion of the Afghan population believes that it has unfairly borne a disproportionate amount of the costs of the conflict, and that the Afghans have not benefited sufficiently from the reconstruction which has taken place to date. The international community can boast quantifiable success in the fields of women's rights, education, health and the media. However, these achievements,

lacking as they do the required economic and social underpinnings, all rest on very shaky foundations. This is only surprising at first glance, as the mantra of the majority of states involved in Afghanistan can be described via the following formula: security is the prerequisite for political stability, and political stability the requirement for economic development. Today, it is evident that this strategy has not borne fruit, and that none of the three aforementioned pillars – including security – can be constructed as an independent entity.

## **Turkey's economic strategy**

Turkey did not make this error. It appeared, prima facie, to have been operating in Afghanistan with the same instruments as the other states: armed forces, development

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SWP Comments 28  
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cooperation organisations and NGOs. However, Ankara added two additional tools to the equation: foreign trade policy and private investors. In point of fact, trade cooperation and its own economic interests were and are original elements of Turkey's involvement in the country. Ankara had declared its economic interests as early as 2001, this clearly and without a false sense of shame. These lie predominantly in the energy and transport sectors. Afghanistan's documented oil and gas resources are, in the mid- and long-term, of just as much interest to the Turkish economy as Chinese plans to construct new, transregional transport routes (Silk Road project) destined to lead through Afghanistan to Anatolia. In 2012, TPAO, Turkey's state-owned oil company, invested 100 million US dollars and embarked on the drilling of boreholes in successfully explored oil and gas fields in northern Afghanistan.

This open pursuit of its own interests does not appear to have harmed Turkey to date. On the contrary, the Afghan side is more likely to view itself as being on an equal footing if it is addressed as an economic partner as opposed to a beneficiary of aid. Ankara's encouragement of private companies to invest in Afghanistan is also having a positive impact. Several Turkish construction companies succeeded in gaining a foothold on the Afghan market within a relatively short space of time. In the first few years of Western involvement, they carried out several NATO assignments in the fields of structural and civil engineering. Thanks to the experience gained in the process, they were subsequently able to secure larger public construction and infrastructure projects. Several sections of the Afghan ring road, designed to connect the country's major cities, were thus built by Turkish enterprises.

As far as trade policy was concerned, Ankara identified local economic bottlenecks and used these successfully for its own economy. As a result, Turkish business professionals maintain a strong presence on the Afghan market today. Turkish prod-

ucts are in demand. They are frequently superior in quality to those of Chinese, Pakistani and Iranian competitors, as well as being affordable. One advantage of Turkish entrepreneurs is doubtless that they are more willing to take risks than the majority of European and American traders-people. Turkish entrepreneurs and their employees have also been kidnapped or even killed. Nevertheless, they have, in the majority of cases, avoided holding themselves up behind high walls topped with barbed wire. In this way, they gave locals the impression that they were in a similar position and did not set themselves apart. Turkish companies also enjoy great respect locally as they use Afghan manpower. Although wages are modest, having a job in Afghanistan is a privilege in a country labouring under an extremely high rate of unemployment.

The Turkish development agency TİKA is also concerned with Afghanistan's economic development. The road construction works and agricultural measures it implements are invariably output-oriented. Cooling systems were constructed in the north of the country, for instance, which allow Afghan farmers to store their products and thus improve their sales prospects. If Afghanistan's economic advancement can be linked with Turkish interests, so much the better. During his visit to Kabul in April 2015, TİKA's President Serdar Çam stated that Turkish industrial machinery could further the establishment of SMEs in Afghanistan, primarily in sectors including textiles, chemicals, mechanical engineering, food processing and packaging.

### **Turkish security policy**

Turkey is also striking out on its own in the realm of security policy, collaborating closely with the other intervention forces on many issues. Ankara endorses a regional solution to the conflict, and therefore initiated the so-called 'Istanbul process'. Within this, Turkey has not only included all Afghanistan's immediate neighbours,

but is also cooperating with the superpowers USA, Russia and China and medium-sized states such as the United Kingdom and Germany. Turkish generals were frequently in command of various sections of the ISAF troops. Turkish officers commanded the entire ISAF mission twice, and Turkey assumed responsibility for security in the capital Kabul and in the Wardak province three times. Today, Ankara protects the international airport in Kabul. Experienced politician Hikmet Çetin held the office of NATO's Senior Civilian Representative in Afghanistan two consecutive times on Turkey's behalf.

Ankara is also heavily involved in the training of the Afghan National Army and the National Police Force. Turkish officers and police personnel not only train their Afghan colleagues – in their tens of thousands – in Afghanistan. Trainees are also invited to spend extended periods in Turkey, where they participate in programmes held at military and police academies. Turkey also funds several military schools in Afghanistan itself. The Turkish secret services collaborate with their international partners, and share intelligence with them, including information gained from areas other services find it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to infiltrate.

Notwithstanding this close cooperation, Turkish involvement in military measures is often deemed merely symbolic. This is because Turkey refused to participate in military campaigns against the Taliban, in the fight against terrorism, and also in operations against drug production and trafficking from the outset, even staying on the margins as far as mine clearance is concerned. Ankara wishes to send a signal to the Afghan population that “we are not an occupying power” – a message which has got through. Not once have Afghan rebels attacked Turkish troops; Turkish soldiers are highly regarded by the Afghan government and the population alike. Turkey's educational and cultural work is aimed at consolidating and propagating this positive image of Turkey within the country.

## **Turkish commitment to education and culture**

Ankara decided to make Afghanistan a focus of its development cooperation at the beginning of its involvement in the country. Between 2005 and 2015, the development agency TİKA, comparable with the GIZ (German Society for International Cooperation), executed over 800 projects – more than half of these in the fields of education and health. Today, TİKA is in the pleasing position of being able to state that it is enabling over 100,000 children to acquire a basic education and has provided over five million Afghans with access to medical care.

However, Turkey's educational and cultural work not only focuses on these goals, which are, in a sense, universal; it also strives to establish a special relationship between the people of both states. For instance, TİKA made the University of Kabul a present of a modern building which is used to house the Department of Turkish Studies. Moreover, Turkey grants 500 scholarships to those wishing to pursue their studies in Turkey each year, and is the only country besides India to accept large amounts of Afghan students.

As far as religion is concerned, TİKA has renovated or reconstructed dozens of mosques and grave sites of pious men. The agency is currently erecting a mausoleum for the former Afghan president Burhanuddin Rabbani in Kabul. Investments like these are well received by the Afghan population, whose citizens are very proud of their culture and religion.

Turkish involvement in other regions is also characterised by a similar thematic orientation to its cultural and educational work in Afghanistan. For TİKA, this means that it aligns itself strictly to the ideas and convictions disseminated by the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), which, in turn, heavily influences the choice of their Turkish cooperation partners. In Afghanistan, TİKA collaborates with the affluent state-owned Turkish Foundation for Religion (Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı). The Turkish

NGOs involved with TİKA all have a strikingly Turkish-nationalist, Islamic profile. This applies to the Foundation for a United Asia (ABV), the Cansuyu Assistance and Cooperation Organisation and particularly to the Humanitarian Relief Foundation (İHH), which played a leading role in the attempt to break through the Israeli naval blockade of the Gaza Strip.

Probably the most dynamic Turkish civil society activists in Afghanistan are affiliated to the so-called Gülen movement (or Hizmet). Its current conflict with the Turkish government has failed to stifle the movement's efforts in Afghanistan to date. The Gülen movement, which considers the exiled Turkish preacher Fethullah Gülen as its *spiritus rector*, includes the aid organisation 'Kimse yok mu?' ('Is No One There?') and eleven private schools, including those for girls. The Gülen schools enjoy an excellent reputation and also attract parents from the country's elite. In addition to English, they teach Turkish at a very high level, which directly benefits the Turkish economic and political landscape. The most active members of the Gülen movement serve voluntarily in Afghanistan. The majority move there for several years with their families. Additionally, the movement brings several dozen Turkish students to Kabul, where they study for several years at the city's university. All this makes the Afghan population feel that they have, in the Turks, found equal partners.

### Turkey as a partner

Turkey's successful work in Afghanistan and its ability to procure direct access to the state and its people strengthens the country's western allies in their resolve to collaborate more intensively with Ankara during future peacekeeping and development operations. As a result, western states have openly been urging Ankara to seek membership within the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Development Assistance Committee (DAC). This committee also observes the develop-

ment cooperation of its member states in terms of "internationally recognised objectives", which makes a certain transparency in conjunction with the work performed vital.

At present, there is little to suggest that Ankara has decided to take such a step. This is because the Turkish government views its development work as part of the struggle with western countries for spheres of influence, above all in the Islamic world, a competition perceived as inevitable.

This attitude is apparent in statements made by members of the Turkish government. In TİKA's annual report of 2011, the then Deputy Prime Minister and current Minister of Justice Bekir Bozdağ wrote that the agency strengthens, "above all, the historic and cultural ties" of the Turkish race: "In order to meet their expectations and to increase Turkey's strategic significance, we must raise our development cooperation to a level which allows us to exist in competition with other nations."

In an interview with the Turkish newspaper *Aksiyon*, TİKA's President, Serdar Çam, emphasised the fact that Turkey and western countries were pursuing conflicting interests in terms of their development cooperation. Implying that the West was engaging in a development policy post-colonial in nature, Çam stated the following, in a good example of 'putting words into someone's mouth': "The Afghan authorities always say that Turkey is the only country which helps without furthering its own interests. We are there to help the people above ground and not because of the riches to be found below it."

Turkey's successful operations in Afghanistan serve as a valuable example to the West, which it can use to develop its own ideas. However, as long as the Turkish government believes itself immured in a type of prophetic rivalry with the West, hopes of closer cooperation must be pruned back to realistic proportions.

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