

Special Issue on Africa

TURKEY AND PEACEBUILDING IN AFRICA: LEADERSHIP, YOUTH AND CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION

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TURKEY'S POSITION BRIDGING EUROPE, the Middle East and Asia, and its growing economic and political power, make it an increasingly important regional and international actor in terms of security, leadership and governance. Within this context, a particular trend over the last decade has been the increasing leadership role of Turkey in conflict resolution and peacebuilding in such African contexts as Somalia and Libya. Compared to a number of other actors such as Western powers, the US and China, Turkey is relatively new in African politics and trade circles. However, it has already expanded its area of influence in the continent by linking its soft power tools of transportation links, trade and education closely with its foreign policy.

In its most generalized and simplified terms, the process might proceed as follows: once an African country is identified as a strategic foreign policy priority and the Turkish Foreign Ministry establishes its diplomatic presence there, it is very likely that Turkish Airlines would soon launch a flight destination in that country. This would be followed by increasing economic links formed by a wide range of globally active Turkish companies. Meanwhile, the Foreign Ministry would probably sign an agreement to ease the existing visa regime between Turkey and that country to increase the level of interaction in the realms of commerce, academia and culture. A number of Turkish schools from the kindergarten to high school levels in the country concerned would also be likely to play an active role in consolidating



such diplomatic and trade relations. These private schools are highly sought after by local communities in their particular contexts, as they provide top level education. Finally, the Turkish government may provide scholarship opportunities to graduates of these schools in order to take a university degree in Turkey.



In a wide range of African countries, from Senegal and Niger to Gabon and Cameroon, such a foreign policy strategy has proved to be successful, with fast growing partnerships in the economic and political spheres. Moreover, in war-torn countries like Somalia, Turkey has become one of the most active actors in the humanitarian and peacebuilding contexts. In August 2012, Turkish

Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan accompanied with his family, a number of ministers and a large group of Turkish business people and celebrities travelled to Somalia to raise awareness to the ongoing conflict and famine in the country. Prime Minister Erdoğan was the first non-African leader visiting Somalia over the last two decades. There have been a number of Somalia peace talk initiatives organized by Turkey acting as an independent third party respected by almost all conflicting sides in Somalia. Turkish Airlines provides the only international gateway for Mogadishu, while Turkish aid organizations and the Turkish bilateral development agency TICA are highly active in a wide range of infrastructure, welfare and service sector programmes in the country. Also, a substantial number of university students from Somalia have already been provided with scholarships to study in Turkey. In other words, Turkey as a rising power is no longer a shy actor of international relations and is steadily showing its presence in most parts of Africa. In keeping with the growing Turkish proclivity for developing its relations with African countries in commerce, trade, education and culture, there are likely to be other similar cases to Somalia where Turkey would again provide its diplomatic, financial and humanitarian assistance to those African countries torn apart by armed conflict. However, if this is a likely scenario for Turkey in Africa, what should be the main cornerstones of its approach to peacebuilding in the continent so that it could avoid mistakes made by other external actors? Also, considering that Turkey claims its increasing interest and influence in Africa is nothing to do with the exploitation of the rich natural resources of the continent as might be the case for other external actors, and on the contrary, is all about to work with African



countries as equal partners, how could and should its approach differ, and how can it develop its own trademark approach in assisting those countries in the enormous challenge of building peace? We recommend the strategy of 'conflict transformation' with a specific emphasis on the role of 'youth' in peacebuilding.

TRANSFORMING CONFLICT AND BUILDING FUTURE PEACE WITH YOUTH

The complex and multifaceted nature of human insecurity is intrinsically linked to shortcomings in governance and poor leadership in a world characterised by globalised conflict and general insecurity. In other words, war and conflict arise from an interconnected set of causal factors, but

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foremost amongst them are weak or repressive governments and lack of effective political leadership. The many conflicts occurring and recurring in Africa and recent events across the Arab world have demonstrated this in visceral terms.

These regions are critical for global security, particularly because of their rich natural resources. They are also some of the most troubled parts of the world because of their protracted political crises and governance challenges, and the influence of international vested interests. These challenges to longstanding regimes have created an environment of uncertainty for the future of their populations and international relations. A number of countries in

the context of the so called 'Arab Spring' such as Bahrain, Egypt, Libya, Tunisia and currently Syria have been experiencing violent clashes as a result of popular uprisings.

The lack of means and methods of peaceful conflict transformation in most of these countries has resulted in a high number of deaths and widespread destruction. In other words, such experiences show that peacebuilding, conflict transformation and non-violence are increasingly important as political tools for societies affected by violent conflict and revolutions, both to reduce the likelihood of violence and prevent return to open hostilities. For post-conflict transformation efforts and peacebuilding to be implemented successfully, more training and dissemination on the appropriate political tools are required. Moreover, leadership plays a vital role in effecting conflict transformation, but is frequently examined merely at the 'macro' level of state government and international organisations.

Following Lederach, we propose a more comprehensive analysis of leadership that is not limited to events, processes and personalities at the macro level. There is a need to explore features, challenges and opportunities for leadership at several levels, combining macro (governmental institutions, political leadership) with 'meso' (NGOs, religious groups, academics) and 'micro' (civil society organisations, youth groups, women's organisations).

The field of conflict transformation and peacebuilding would benefit greatly from a deeper understanding of interactions between different levels of leadership, with particular reference to the different roles, mechanisms and tools that can be identified at each level. Analysis from multiple levels provides a broader explanation of conflict dynamics and helps to fit 'localised' conflict transformation methods into wider structures at national or regional levels.





Turkey's PM Erdogan
and Somalia's President Ahmed

Adopting this broader approach to the role of leadership in peacebuilding helps to identify critical processes and individuals who are strategically placed within structures that connect the macro, meso and micro levels. This connection of bottom-up and top-down leadership structures more accurately reflects dynamics and relationships at play in conflict transformation efforts.

Another critical issue to be considered in the context of conflict transformation in Africa is the challenge of youth bulges. Both Middle East and North African contexts and Sub-Saharan African contexts have a young population, and in the recent political uprising in the Middle East and North Africa the youth has played a prominent role. From an academic perspective youth as a conceptual category are 'othered' in the discourse on peace and conflict; they are created as

potentially dangerous 'subjects' and policy approaches often regard them as 'a problem.' Much writing on youth and conflict tends to be overly negative, focusing on the dangers posed by disaffected youth as evident in negative connotations of the "youth bulge" or 'at risk youth'. The presence of large youth cohorts is also seen as making a country susceptible to political violence and crime. Such a pejorative image is further compounded by an equally thin focus on youth's positive role in peacebuilding and reconciliation processes in communities of return and resettlement.

In peacebuilding responses by the majority of actors in Africa, there is a lack of focus on the role of youth in both conflict prevention and post-conflict reconstruction, suggesting a serious deficiency in our understanding of the processes whereby societies emerge from violent conflict. >>>



Turkish President Abdullah Gül's visit to Ghana

This, in turn, raises questions about our understanding of the sustainability of peacebuilding, particularly with regards to post-accord violence prevention and societal reconciliation and reconstruction. It represents important knowledge gap which calls us to look more carefully at the possibilities of harnessing the energies of youth for peacebuilding. This is a critical niche area that could form a significant aspect of Turkish policy for peacebuilding in Africa. Turkey's existing joined up foreign policy with the components of laying sound foundations for trade, education and culture means that there could be many meaningful opportunities for working with youth in peacebuilding responses. Turkey should support initiatives that would enable youth to become peacebuilders within their own immediate communities. This would require capacity building programmes with an emphasis on not only education and training, but also on creating access to means for securing livelihoods and employment.

In such environments of conflict transformation, it is clear that key factors such as youth bulges, an increasingly educated middle class, and greater

access to the media and new means of communication have played a significant role. However, it is critical to understand how these factors would have a long-lasting impact on wider political transformation mechanisms at societal and institutional levels and incorporate them in the design of peacebuilding strategies. To investigate how different conflict transformation strategies would be applied in different circumstances in relation to culture, socio-economic development and political freedom is a significant starting point for the development of comprehensive and in-depth analysis. This is particularly important considering that the current knowledge on conflicts in Africa is often derived from conflict management and resolution perspectives based on a realist approach to conflict. Such a perspective marginalizes the significant role of communities in social, political and conflict transformations, and their prospective contributions in identifying solutions to contemporary human security challenges in the region. This has led to a disconnection between governing elites and people, and equally led to a biased approach by the West, which solely



communicates with ruling elites to the exclusion of ordinary people's concerns, needs and aspirations. This lack of popular engagement on the part of existing external actors provides Turkey with an opportunity to conceptualise its peacebuilding strategy for Africa in a way that it would act as a catalyst to provide linkages between different levels of leadership and ordinary people.

To address such a critical shortcoming in our understanding of the conflict and political violence in Africa, it is imperative that there should be a community-centred perspective which questions the use of western-centric and technocratic conflict resolution methods. We believe that there is a wealth of experience in

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conflict transformation in the day-to-day lives of many people in Africa, and therefore that it is essential to give a voice and recognition to how these local mechanisms work. Moreover, there is a need to question why communities often find themselves amid violence that is the result of external interference. It is also important that the approach to local means of conflict transformation is not based on an oversimplification of a binary type relationship in terms of traditional versus western-centric.

CONCLUSION

Turkey is a new actor in the spheres of international humanitarian aid, post-conflict reconstruction and peacebuilding, and this is

probably its main advantage, as it could learn lessons from other actors' experiences in similar contexts to draw up its own strategy. Its cohesive response in Somalia has already placed Turkey in a unique position in responding to a complex set of peace and development related challenges. However, this could only be sustained and transformed as part of a long-term strategy for peacebuilding challenges in Africa and elsewhere in the world. It is time for that!

Turkey needs to come up with its own strategy that would listen to the voice of war-torn societies and enable them to build their own peace. Turkey's strategy should be a viable alternative to what western-centric conflict responses fail to achieve. Repeating the Western models of conflict resolution and management would have nothing new to contribute to the practice of peacebuilding.

Youth needs to be the dynamo of this process and a peacebuilding strategy that would work with youth in their own communities and aim for transforming conflicts rather than managing or resolving them should be the way forward. Until now youth has always been considered as a risk for peace, ignoring the fact that they are often the most resourceful group of stakeholders in most war-torn societies. If Turkey's peacebuilding strategy could work with youth effectively by merging a wide range of needs, expectations and aspirations in employment, livelihoods, education, political participation and social status, we would start to see a distinctively different and effective way of peacebuilding – assisting war-affected people to transform their own conflicts so that they could live in an environment of peace, security and development.

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