

## THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN BOSNIA AND TURKEY (I)

## A Political Romance

**Turkish influence over deeply fragmented Bosnia has been omnipresent in recent years**

"I wholeheartedly greet our 81 provinces as well as sister and friendly capitals and cities of the world (...). I thank my brothers in Egypt who are struggling for democracy and who understand our struggle very well. I thank my brothers in the Balkans, in Bosnia, in Macedonia, in Kosovo and in all cities in Europe who celebrate our victory with the same joy we have here."

These were the opening lines of the victory speech Turkish Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, delivered on the night of 30 March 2014, following his party's victory at local elections. To and at no one's surprise, Bosnia was mentioned again. Back in 2011, in his victory speech, Mr. Erdogan alluded to Turkey's aspiration to be a voice in the West for the Middle Eastern region and Muslims, saying Bosnians, Lebanese, Syrians, and Palestinians also benefited from his victory: "Believe me, Sarajevo won today as much as Istanbul, Beirut won as much as Izmir, Damascus won as much as Ankara, Ramallah, Nablus, Jenin, the West Bank, Jerusalem won as much as Diyarbak'r."

### Historical Overview of Relations

The relationship between the Republic of Turkey and Bosnia and Herzegovina dates back to 15th century - long before these two current entities existed. In 1463 Bosnia became the westernmost Ottoman province, named Bosnian Krajiste. The province was given the full status of an eyalet -meaning constituent province of the Empire- until the Berlin Congress in 1878 when it was handed over to the Austro-Hungarian Empire. From that time until the end of the Cold War in 1989, there were no real possibilities for Turkey and BiH to establish significant ties. Following the dissolution of former Yugoslavia and Turkey's recognition of BiH as an independent state in the 1990s, however, relations began developing intensely.

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Mostly due to the conflict that Bosnia experienced in early 1990s, the suffering of Bosnian Muslims (Bosniaks) evoked strong sympathies among Turks. As Orhan Dede explained, "Turks developed an emotional approach towards Bosnia. Different ideological circles were aware of problems in Bosnia and paid attention to it. Since then, Bosnia has occupied a large portion of Turkish attention."

Turkey played a humanitarian role at the beginning of this relationship that also included reconstruction of the war-torn infrastructure. Through one such program, for instance, Turkey committed 46.5 million dollars - or about a tenth of the amount committed by the European Community - for economic reconstruction and development of governmental structures after the war. In 2012, the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) allocated around 10.7 million Euros, out of which 50-70 percent went to restoration projects. Today, TIKA is one of the biggest actors in the cultural revival in BiH; its Sarajevo office has the third largest budget worldwide. In the words of Zulkuf

Oruc, TIKA's coordinator for its BiH office, their mission is "building a future through rebuilding history and past."

Along with post-war reconstruction efforts, Turkish diplomatic efforts in Bosnia became more focused. When Minister of Foreign Affairs Ahmet Davutoglu took office in 2009, the foundations of emotional and heartfelt relations between BiH and Turkey had already been laid. His most important theoretical analysis of Turkey's foreign policy outlook, published in 2001 under the title Strategic Depth, proposed a new relationship with Turkey's immediate neighbors that corresponded to the historical and geopolitical dimensions of modern Turkey while building on its Ottoman past. Davutoglu devotes special attention to BiH,

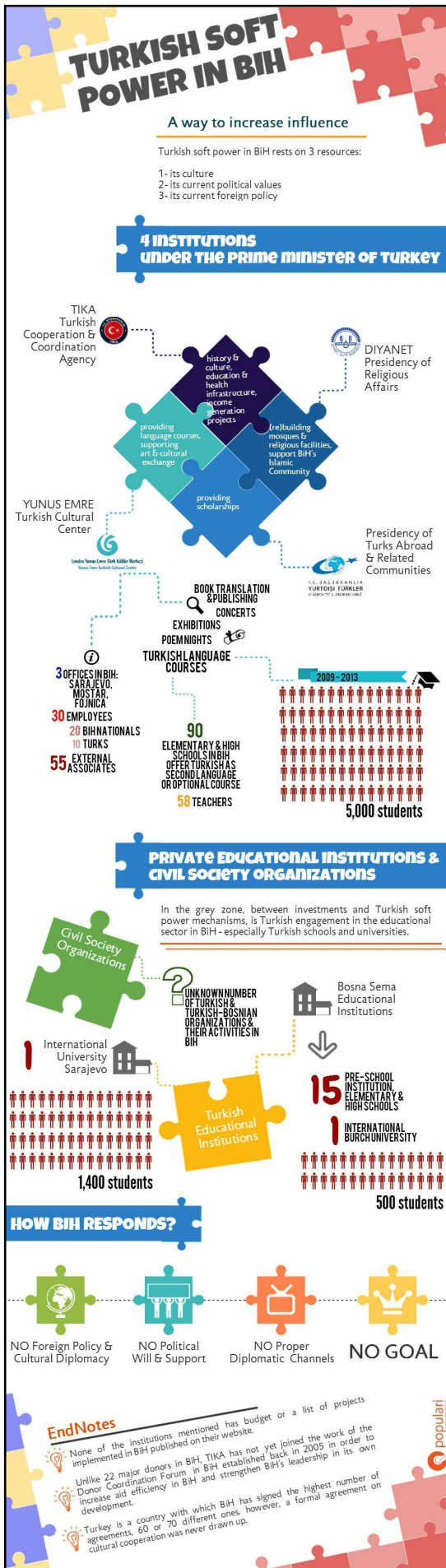
citing the country as "a political, economic, and cultural advanced outpost of Turkey reaching into Central Europe."

### Bosnia: Turkish Outpost?

In his work, Davutoglu refers to the connecting links for Turkey's Balkan policy, the main focus of which is local Muslim communities: "The basis of Turkey's political influence in the Balkans is the Ottoman remnants, the Muslim communities. (...) At first Turkey's natural allies are the two countries with a Muslim majority [BiH and Albania]. The will to turn this common historic accumulation into a natural alliance has now emerged."

The actions and projects Turkey is implementing under this cultural umbrella are used as a very powerful instrument. Davutoglu's foreign policy strategy in BiH goes by the book, fundamentally aimed at winning the "hearts and minds" not only of BiH politicians, but also the public in general. At the same time, Bosnian foreign policy is based on a single document dating back to 2003, titled "General Directions and Priorities for Implementing the Foreign Policy of BiH." This merely four-page document, developed by the tripartite Presidency of BiH more than a decade ago, serves as the key framework for BiH's relations with the rest of the world today. It is clear that it does not serve as an adequate base for the country to proactively shape its relations with other countries.

Bosnia is a deeply fragmented country that contains several levels of political structure. The entities were formally established by the Dayton Peace Agreement in 1995, based largely on the territories held by the two warring sides at the time. The Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina covers 51 percent of Bosnia and Herzegovina's total area, while Republika Srpska covers 49 percent. The Federation consists of ten cantons, and Bosniaks make up the majority of its population. In the words of BiH Presidency member Bakir Izetbegovic, Turkey is of utmost importance for Bosnia:



"We consider Turkey as a big brother who is strong and wise." This sentiment goes even further: "The achievement of one brother is also the success of the other [brother]. Thus, we are proud of our brother Turkey."

**Perceptions of Turkey in Bosnia**

A contemporary Bosnian burden of dividing everything by three (according to the Constitution of BiH, Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs, have been defined as constituent peoples, along with Others) is inevitably manifested in domestic politics as well as foreign policy; relations with Turkey are no exception. A profound difference in both the visibility and the perception of Turkey's influence in contemporary BiH is very apparent among its three constituent peoples. Historically, Bosniaks consider the Ottoman era of their history as the "Golden Age" of BiH, and see it as the birth of their religious identity. BiH's Christian populations of Serbs and Croats, in contrast, deem the Ottoman period as a time of enslavement and tragedy that lasted for more than four centuries. Today, the majority of Bosniaks support Turkey's ever-growing influence in the country. However, what Bosniaks view as friendly rhetoric and proof of brotherhood, BiH's Serb and Croat populations find uncomfortable. As a consequence, according to some, Turkey's increasing presence in BiH exacerbates already existing internal divisions. In words of Milorad Dodik, President of Republika Srpska: "Turkey is causing a lot of problems in BiH. It does not have absolute right to meddle into regional issues." Veso Vegar, a public relations officer of second-largest Croatian political party known as the Croatian Democratic Union 1990 (HDZ 1990), is of the same opinion. He points to the lack of a warm welcome for Erdogan's overtures (cited above) by many citizens in BiH, particularly by Croats and Serbs. Vegar concludes: "I do not believe that someone likes to hear that BiH is an Ottoman legacy." At the same time, Turkey also finds this to be a real issue that must be addressed, as its stated policy is to support the whole country rather than just one of the entities. The former First

Counselor at the Turkish Embassy in Sarajevo, Yasemin Eralp, explains: "This is the major problem we Turks have in Bosnia - the image. We support the country, not any entity specifically, and we are working on changing this perception."

While Turkey officials might present efforts toward transforming this image as their main agenda in BiH, the situation on the ground reflects that these efforts have a long way to go. The Yunus Emre Cultural Center opened three offices in BiH, none of which is located in Republika Srpska. Out of 25 branch offices of the Turkish Ziraat Bank in BiH, only one is located in Republika Srpska (in the capital Banja Luka). 4,500 children in over 90 elementary schools in Federation BiH are currently learning Turkish. The Presidency of Turks Abroad and Kin Communities (YTB) experienced reluctance by students from the Republika Srpska to learn about scholarship opportunities in Turkey: "At the University of Sarajevo, we had some one hundred students attending the presentation, while in the RS, only one student in Istocno Sarajevo and some 15 to 20 students in Banja Luka." Finally, no large scale production investment has been made in Republika Srpska. To date, majority of the activities organized by Turkey have been taking place in Federation BiH and are generally more welcomed in this Bosnian entity.

At the diplomatic level, yields are similarly meager. To-date, Turkish politicians have visited Republika Srpska only on one occasion - in 2011, when Davutoglu met with RS President Dodik. Over a period of more than three years, Nebojsa Radmanovic, the member of the Presidency from Republika Srpska, attended three formal meetings; Zeljko Komsic, the Croat member of the Presidency, held four official meetings with its Turkish counterparts. In contrast, Bakir Izetbegovic, the Bosniak member of the Presidency maintained by far the most intensive contacts with the Turkish side. These resulted in no less than 25 formal meetings with Turkish government officials.

**Tomorrow: The Relationship Between Bosnia and Turkey (II) - Counting Every Penny?**