

The Collateral of the Rising Public Diplomacy in Turkey: The Presidency of Religious Affairs and the Religious Diplomacy

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It has been widely discussed whether Turkish foreign policy has been changing since the Justice and Development Party (AKP hereafter) came into power in 2002. Among the new concepts which signal a probable change in the foreign policy, “public diplomacy” seems to be a significant one considering that AKP has even founded the Office of Public Diplomacy in 2010 within the Turkish Prime Ministry. Public diplomacy, the task of serving national interests through influencing foreign states’ peoples, winning their hearts and minds, instrumentalizes a state’s traits and is carried by many public institutions. Religion is one of the cultural traits of a state which serves public diplomacy with its binding influence on public. For a few decades, the terms “religious diplomacy”, “inter-religious diplomacy” or “faith diplomacy” have been used to indicate the positive impact of religion on diplomacy, especially on “public diplomacy” which addresses public rather than the traditional diplomatic institutions.

Religious diplomacy has mainly two meanings. On the one hand, it means establishing an interreligious dialogue between states and their societies. On the other hand, it implies promoting religiously based relations with other states and their societies sharing the same religion. In Turkey, Presidency of Religious Affairs is the main carrier of religious diplomacy as it has started be expressed by the Presidency itself. A closer look at the campaigns and policies of the Presidency especially in the Balkans, Africa and the Middle East in the last decade shows that it complements the government’s public diplomacy establishing religious ties with the states especially which have Muslim populations. The Presidency is organizing humanitarian aid campaigns for Muslims suffering all around the world while participating in the ones the government organizes. In press releases, The Presidency addresses all people and all international organizations to free the Muslims from poverty, injustice and violence. It also regulates the education of the religious personnel who are to work outside of the Turkish borders. The Presidency organizes international programs for those willing to “construct a future based on their cultural

origins” and “satisfy the religious, cultural, social and psychological needs of the Muslims with their knowledge on Islamic theology.” Looking at the campaigns, press releases, international programs, conferences, seminars and the discourse used in these, the paper tries to show how the Presidency cooperates with the government serving public diplomacy.

In this research, the aim is to stress the contribution of The Presidency of Religious Affairs to the public diplomacy especially in the last decade. It can be easily observed that aid campaigns for Muslim populations outside of the border have become a major divisive issue and divided the Turkish population into two as the ones willing to help poor Muslim people for the sake of God and/or humanity and the ones criticizing this argument insisting that Turkey has itself helpless people inside of its own borders. The motivation of the presentation is to point out the insufficiency of the discussion whether AKP unnecessarily engages with Muslim populations outside of the Turkish borders. For a few decades, public diplomacy and religious diplomacy as its complementary have been crucial tools in international relations, and analyzing the AKP’s partaking in humanitarian campaigns outside the borders without taking this viewpoint into consideration would be fall short.

Therefore, the presentation intends to remark that The Presidency of Religious Affairs with the religious diplomacy it carries has also been an element in international relations for a while and analysis on AKP’s foreign policy should also pay attention to this religious diplomacy dimension as a part of public diplomacy strategy.

Keywords: Public Diplomacy, Religious Diplomacy, the Presidency of Religious Affairs, the Justice and Development Party (AKP), Foreign Policy