

# Turkey's role in Bosnia and Herzegovina

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## Abstract

The legacy of the Ottoman Empire is still evident in Bosnia-Herzegovina and all through the Balkans, and continues to play an important role in Muslim societies. Under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the AKP instrumentalizes the Ottoman legacy to strengthen its foreign policy, as is evident in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Economic means and developmental aid are, however, secondary, compared to the cultural and educational influence Turkey exerts in the region. The schisms between the Gülen movement and the AKP are also felt in the region.

**Key words:** Bosnia and Herzegovina, Turkey, Southeastern Europe, Contemporary History, Foreign Policy

Contemporary Turco-Bosnian relations have been fundamentally shaped by the Ottoman rule in Bosnia of the mid-15th century until 1878. This influenced the country's character in various ways, most visibly by establishing an enduring large Muslim demographic presence. After the Ottoman withdrawal, including during the socialist period, references to Ottoman history have officially and unofficially remained an important cornerstone of the ethno-political ideologies to which Bosnian Muslims adhered while elements of Ottoman culture have continued to impact their language and daily life. Bosnian Islamic religious praxis and thought have continued to function within the coordinates of the Ottoman version of Islam. This has contributed largely to the fact that the contemporary advocacy of Turkish foreign policy and Turkey itself in Bosnia largely functions on the basis of the exploitation of references to the Ottoman historical period or the surviving Ottoman heritage in that country or Turkey. This nurtures a widespread sense of connection with contemporary Turkey, especially those forces in Turkish politics that seek legitimation and inspiration in the Ottoman era.

The fall of the socialist regime in Yu-

goslavia around 1990 not only enabled the sudden revival of Islamic religious life in Bosnia, but also facilitated comprehensive changes in attitudes among Bosnian Muslims towards its past. Most prominently, ties with the Ottoman past started to be re-discovered in this context by political, academic and religious actors for the purpose of building the post-communist ethno-cultural identity of Bosnian Muslims. Approximately at the same time the gradual relaxation of the Kemalist grip over society during the 1990s and 2000s led, from the Turkish perspective, to a similar process, that of the large-scale discovery of the very same Ottoman heritage in Bosnia and other parts of the Balkans. The Bosnian war during the period 1992-1995 provided an opportunity for the actors from Bosnia and Turkey, mostly belonging to conservative Islamic socio-cultural spectrum; the various actors promoting Turco-Bosnian relations in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2000-10s were united by a special kind of affective bond, a common discourse consisting of attitudes towards conservative Islam in general, Ottoman history and Turco-Bosnian relations. The Turkish conservative scene in particular profited from the situation by creating and using the narrative of an endangered ex-

Ottoman Muslim population in Bosnia, threatened with extinction, for the plight of which Kemalist Turkey had no concern. Its only true supporters were supposedly the conservative Turks, who insisted on providing assistance to the endangered Muslim communities related to Turkey on the basis of Islamic and Ottoman cultural solidarity. By the end of the 20th century, the Turkish conservative scene came to encompass a large, possibly the largest, part of Turkish society and it came to dominate Turkey politically after the AKP came to power in 2002. Under AKP rule, the topic of Bosnia – as well as the Balkans in general – emerged as an important topic for those Turkish discourses on foreign policy that championed the use of the Ottoman heritage as a foreign policy tool and stirred the interest of the Turkish public.

In Bosnia, the result of these renewed ties, especially since 2002, is the emergence of a loose policy network that includes persons and organizations from Turkey present in Bosnia and Herzegovina and domestic Bosnian Muslim pro-Turkish activists, mostly belonging to the Bosnian Muslim conservative scene. Conservative Muslims represent a significant societal group in Bosnia. A population with Muslim roots currently represents around 50% of the entire Bosnian population and approximately one third of them can be described as conservatives. According to the 2012 Pew Research report, 30% of Muslims from Bosnia attend mosque once per week (compared to 44% in Turkey) and 36% claim religion is very important in their life (compared to 67% in Turkey).

The so-called Neo-Ottomanism has been a very influential conceptualization of Turkish foreign policy introduced at the end of 2000s. Although the term Neo-Ottomanism has been in occasional use since the mid-1970s

and more commonly since the 1990s, it became widespread in 2009-10. The Turkish government does not endorse the use of this term. It indeed officially objects to its use as an allegedly anti-Turkish propaganda tool and has continued to insist that its foreign policy has been based upon liberal-democratic values, multiculturalism economic and national interests. According to proponents of the term, it describes in a sufficiently precise manner the content and origins of the discourse which is used to justify and support the new Turkish foreign policy orientation under the AKP, especially since 2009-10. Such authors define the trends associated with the concept of Neo-Ottomanism as a major shift from the previous Kemalist Turkish foreign and cultural policies in the Republic of Turkey. It is suggested that this new version of TFPD is based on the view of Ottoman history as developed by Turkish conservative intellectual elites. Although Turkey remained pro-Western in its overall foreign policy orientation and although it established very good relations and a strong economic presence in the predominantly Christian neighbouring countries of the Balkans, a parallel focus of its foreign policy has been on the Muslim communities in the Balkans - notably on the largely Muslim parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the ethnically related Muslim minorities in Serbia and Montenegro, as well as among Muslim Albanians in Albania, Macedonia and Kosovo. It also aims to establish Turkish presence in the Middle East, prominently by sponsoring the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and developing strong relations with countries like Qatar. All definitions that proposed the use of the concept of Neo-Ottomanism more or less agree that this discourse has pragmatic aims – to serve the goals of the Turkish government

and Turkish non-governmental actors as a means of legitimation and mobilization with the purpose of influencing the power relations in the former Ottoman territories where Turkish foreign policy is active. This includes establishing close alliances particularly with culturally related communities – in addition to the already existing strongholds in the ethnic Turkish and Turkmen communities and among Turkic peoples – as possible strongholds of Turkish influence. It is usually suggested that Neo-Ottomanism discursively justifies the increased presence and influence of Turkish governmental and non-governmental entities, that it aims at creating a friendly environment for them and that these entities are even its main actors. For example, the Turco-American political scientist Ömer Taşpınar defines Neo-Ottomanism as the predominant concept in the foreign policy circles in the Republic of Turkey under the AKP and as having the following characteristics: the embrace of the Muslim and the Ottoman heritage in Turkey and abroad, and using both to increase “soft” Turkish influence in formerly Ottoman territories; the simultaneous acceptance of “liberal secularism” and “multiculturalism”; openness to and cooperation with both Western and Islamic countries. Taşpınar sees this “flexible mind set” as a sign of political self-confidence, ambition and willingness to re-invent Turkey as a “pivotal state” or even as a “regional superpower” with “a very active diplomatic, political and economic role” in the wide region of which it is the “centre”. On the other hand, the American scholar Nicholas Danforth, while being very sceptical about Neo-Ottomanism insists that ... *the metaphor makes no sense ... misrepresents history in order to misunderstand the present ... [because it] implicitly links political Islam and Ottoman nostalgia to some vaguely de-*

*finied anti-American, anti-European, pro-Muslim, or generally Middle East-oriented foreign policy.*

Alternative conceptualizations of Turkish foreign policy since 2008-09, often coming from authors supportive of Turkey, include terms like “multilateralism” and “activism”.

The Turkish foreign affairs minister Ahmet Davutoğlu (2009-2014) has been seen by some as the most prominent ideologue of Neo-Ottomanism in foreign policy and is unanimously held to be the foremost champion of the use of the Ottoman heritage as a Turkish foreign policy tool. The coming years showed however that, considering the majority population of the Balkans is of Christian heritage, the ambitious vision of Turkish leadership in the Balkans proclaimed in Sarajevo had some lasting resonance only in the conservative parts of Muslim communities of that region.

Turkish state actors should be considered the main players in creating a discourse promoting Turkish foreign policy goals in the Bosnian public due to their financial capabilities. The main venue for their activity is the cultural and humanitarian field as well as their careful media framing and dissemination. Turkish state actors constitute the pillar of what is usually described as Turkish “soft power” in Bosnia and elsewhere. After the war in Bosnia ended in 1995, the Turkish government assisted the efforts to reconstruct Bosnia’s war-torn society and economy through diplomatic, military, humanitarian and developmental aid. Nevertheless, the direct Turkish financial assistance to Bosnia was relatively small. According to some estimates, around 20 million US Dollars in assistance were made available for various projects in Bosnia during the 1995-2002 period, most prominently one million for the reconstruction of the Mostar Old Bridge. The Turkish offer to make loans

to Bosnia was also refused by Bosnian government during this period. The period since the AKP came to power in 2002 has seen a dramatic surge of interest in Bosnia among Turkish state actors, which was reflected primarily in their increased spending and media presence. The support for a relatively large number of Bosnian students at Turkish universities since early 1990s through scholarships and dormitory placements is also one of the important aspects of the Turkish state's support for Bosnia. However, it is often not taken into account and there are few relevant data available.

Since 2002, the Bosnian branch of the Turkish Agency for Cooperation and Coordination (*Türk İşbirliği ve Kalkınma İdaresi Başkanlığı*, TİKA) has become the most visible Turkish governmental actor in Bosnia. This governmental agency with the aim of providing Turkish assistance internationally – during the 1990s usually in Central Asia – was founded in 1992 and since 1999 has been directly under charge of the Turkish PM. TİKA was active in Bosnia in delivering donations by Turkish companies as aid to the devastated country. According to the law of 2011, its duties are “to improve economic, commercial, technical, social, cultural and educational cooperation with developing countries by conducting projects ... to implement projects to eliminate prejudices about Turkey and to strengthen inter-communal dialogue among civilisations.” After the AKP came to power in Turkey in 2002, TİKA's activities focused on cultural projects and economic development in Bosnia visibly increased. For example, in 2012 alone Turkey allocated to Bosnia approx. 16 million Euros in official developmental aid through TİKA, which is a 5-fold increase of the assistance given in 1998. The Bosnian branch of TİKA had the third largest budget

of all TİKA branches worldwide. In the same year, the USA granted a mere 29 million euros, a 6-fold decrease since 1998! According to TİKA officials, in 2012 around 50-70% of its budget went to the renovation of the Ottoman architectural heritage, while the rest went mostly to smaller entrepreneurial and smaller infrastructure projects. From the very beginning the AKP government started developing official cultural ties in with Bosnia. A bilateral agreement on cultural cooperation, which provided for the opening of cultural centres, Bosnian centres in Turkey and Turkish centres in Bosnia, was signed by presidents Demirel and Alija Izetbegović in December 1999, but due to the stall in the bilateral relations it was realized only after the AKP came to power. The Turkish Cultural Centre (*Turski kulturni centar*) which was organisationally an arm of the Turkish Embassy but was housed in a separate building was opened finally in April 2003. This institution presented Turkish culture to the Bosnian public focusing on contemporary literature, painting, music, theatre and cinematography with more cosmopolitan features. Turkish cultural diplomacy in Bosnia and elsewhere took a conservative turn after PM Erdoğan in May 2007 established the government-funded and directed Yunus Emre Foundation (*Yunus Emre Vakfı*). Since 2009, this foundation has been the founder of Yunus Emre Institutes (*Yunus Emre Enstitüleri*) in foreign capitals and taken over the role of Turkish Cultural Centres active within diplomacy. The new institutes aim to ensure “that societies around the world will become better acquainted with Turkey from more accurate sources” through promotion of Turkish culture and Turkish language instruction. The Turkish Cultural Institute - Yunus Emre Institute (*Yunus Emre Institut – Turski kulturni cen-*

tar) in Sarajevo was opened in November 2009 by foreign affairs minister Davutoğlu and was the first outpost of the institute outside Turkey, which strengthened the impression that Bosnia was discursively extremely important for the Turkish AKP government.

The economic relations of Turkey with Bosnia seem to be of small importance for the Turkish economy and of moderate importance for the Bosnian economy. However, their development, especially with respect to Turkish investment, seems to be very high on the list of Turkish foreign policy priorities as well as an extremely important discursive line for its promoters and supporters, regardless whether Turkish or local in Bosnia, a country that suffered an economic cataclysm during the war and has continued to suffer from chronic and systemic economic problems in the 2000s and 2010s. The media and diplomatic attention, as noted by analysts, seems to distort the real proportions of these relations. For example, an analyst from the think-tank *Populari*, Alida Vračić, sums the perception of the Turkish investment in Bosnia as follows:

*... as there is a long-lasting misconception regarding what they really are and what is the amount/significance of these investments. Economically, for Turkey, the western Balkans are insignificant. Within the region, high-profile investments in certain roads and airports give the impression of a huge amount of Turkish investment. In fact, with the exception of Albania and Kosovo, there has been much talk but far less cash. In spite of lots of sentimental rhetoric between the countries in the region, especially Bosnia and Turkey, Turkey doesn't rank in the top 10 countries when it comes to investment. The link that exists is totally unexploited. I am afraid that Bosniaks think it is enough to "share" Muslim brotherhood and the cash will*

*flow into the country, having no serious offers on the table, while Turks invest in other places.*

Major investment projects in Bosnia by the economic actors from the Republic of Turkey include companies like *Natron Hayat Ltd. Maglaj*, *Şişecam Soda Lukavac*, and *Turkish Ziraat Bank Bosnia Sarajevo d.d.* with more than 8 thousand employed persons in 2013.

Bosnian Muslim conservative (and ethno-nationalist) politics is dominated by *Stranka demokratske akcije* (the Party of Democratic Action; SDA), which is without a doubt one of the most important supporters of the pro-Turkish activism in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Other smaller groups and personalities also belong to the Bosnian conservative political scene but their impact is rather limited. This party has generally stressed the Bosnian perspective, interests and experience in the rapprochement between the countries, in contrast to actors financed directly from Turkey, who are entirely discursively dependent on the Turkish perspective.

The ICBH, with its array of activities and institutions (mosques, masjids, pious foundations, schools, faculties, research institutes, halal certification centres, news agency and so on) is one of the most important players in the contemporary rapprochement between Bosnia and Herzegovina – i.e. its Muslim part – and the AKP-ruled Turkey. The ICBH's historical roots in Ottoman state-controlled Islam and the Ottoman-mediated cultural and spiritual heritage of Bosnian Muslims are the main reason for this tendency, which have contributed to the ease of communication among the various actors within the ICBH and the conservative scene in Turkey. Today its main Turkish partners in building firm relations are TİKA with its investment in Ottoman architec-



ture, which prominently includes the religious infrastructure, and the Turkish state directorate for religious affairs, DİB, with which the ICBH has initiated cooperation, mostly in the area of education. The new AKP government, elected in 2002, committed itself very soon to establishing relations with the ICBH. On July 6th 2004 the DİB president Ali Bardakoglu and *reisul-ulema* Cerić signed in Ankara the memorandum of understanding between the DİB and the ICBH which declared that both organisations “would closely collaborate on questions of the interpretation of Islam on the basis of the common experience and tradition”. After 2009, the cordial relations between the Cerić-led ICBH and the Turkish authorities deteriorated, although never completely. The Bosnian side resented the attempts by the DİB and Turkish foreign policy to gain control in internal questions of Muslim communities in Serbia and Montenegro and even Bosnia, which was, according to some analysts, part of the AKP government’s wish to coordinate Muslim communities in the Balkans. Under Husein Kavazović, the new *reisul-ulema* elected in 2012, the ICBH leadership visibly improved relationships with the Turkish government.

The Fethullah Gülen movement, also known as the *Hizmet* (service) movement, appeared in Bosnia during the 1992-95 war as a part of its humanitarian and educational activities, which also aimed to build the public profile of the movement within the Turkish conservative scene. During the 1990s Gülen’s representatives from Turkey managed to set up a nucleus of an informal network of Bosnian activists, financiers and supporters who accepted Gülen’s writings as inspiration and followed the same organisational principles. While several foundations and NGOs were es-

tablished as a public platform of activities, the flexible network has been, as in Turkey, the basis for all the activities of the movement which does not exist as a distinctive legal entity. The educational activities of the *Hizmet* in Bosnia - publicly the most visible activity that can be associated with the movement - are financed and co-ordinated by the private foundation *Bosna Sema Obrazovne Institucije* (Bosna Sema Educational Institutions; BSEI), which was founded in 1998 with the aim of “assisting the educational system of Bosnia and Herzegovina” and “safeguarding the historical and cultural heritage” in that country. In 2015, the foundation operated 4 private kindergartens, 5 private primary schools and 7 private secondary schools, as well as the *Burç* (Constellation) University in Sarajevo, which was founded in 2008. The rift between the AKP and the Gülen movement at the end of 2013 led to a deterioration of relations between the ICBH and SDA, by that time strongly influenced by AKP foreign policy, and the Bosnian *Hizmet* which is seen by AKP-associated pro-Turkish activists as a branch of the centrally commanded Gülen organisation (in AKP parlance labelled “the parallel State”). Many personal contacts have been broken (e.g. the children of many ICBH personalities left *Hizmet* schools) and the movement became increasingly isolated in the Islamic scene in Bosnia.

The Turkish private educational institutions – the International University of Sarajevo (IUS) and *Burç* University as well as 13 primary and secondary schools established by the private foundations BSEI and SEDEF - represent the backbone of Turkish influence and pro-Turkish activism in Bosnia and Herzegovina. According to the *Novo vrijeme* newspaper, Turkish investors have invested “millions of euros” in opening Turkish uni-

versities and schools in the Bosnian capital Sarajevo and other towns and several thousands of students and teaching staff from Turkey and other countries also have also provided support for the sustaining and the development of Bosnian economy due to the long-term stays of foreign newcomers, the employment of local teaching and other staff as well as through the transfer of skills and experiences to the local population.

Ilidža near Sarajevo alone there are cur-

over 3,000 enrolled students from Turkey and Bosnia, as well as from other Balkan countries. At the two Turkish universities situated at the Middle East, Africa and Asia.

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