

# The Waves of Turkey's Proactive Foreign Policy Hitting South-Asian Coasts: Turkey-Bangladesh Relations

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## Abstract

*An undisputed development in International Relations occurred in diplomacy. With the 21<sup>st</sup> century state-to-state diplomacy was diluted with the inclusion of several actors. In addition to state agencies and business circles, human and societal elements also became active actors of diplomacy. Therefore diplomatic actions in order to be successful need to cover many segments of social life in addition to politico-economic aspects. Turkish foreign policy, more clearly with Justice and Development Party (AKP) underwent through several changes. The most obvious one was its spurred proactivity. In contrast with the preliminary concerns, these changes, which were named by several analysts as neo-Ottomanism, did not tear off Turkey's relations with its historical and strategic allies, i.e. the US and the EU. Yet, they gave Turkish foreign policy an expanded focus and an extended outreach. This proactivity did not only operate via economy or diplomacy but also merged with the cultural heritage of Ottoman Empire and its commonalities shared by several countries in Turkey's very and far away neighborhoods. Although AKP's proactivity was more heavily felt in the Middle East, its waves hit Asia-Pacific as well. This article aims to elaborate how much of a contribution these cultural commonalities could/could have provided to AKP elites' diplomatic aims. Bangladesh in this sense is an important example since it was not a well-elaborated example in the literature and also depicts how quickly these commonalities could heal impaired bilateral relations with Turkey.*

**Key words:** Proactive foreign policy, Turkey, Bangladesh, Justice and Development Party

## Türkiye'nin Eylem Yanlısı Dış Politikasının Güney Asya Kıyılarına Yansımaları: Türkiye-Bangladeş İlişkileri

### Özet

*Uluslararası İlişkilerde tartışmasız gelişmelerden biri diplomasi alanında gerçekleşmiştir. 21. yüzyıl ile beraber devletler arası diplomasi, bünyesine giren pek çok unsur ile beraber daha karışık bir hal almıştır. Devlet birimleri ve ekonomik aktörlere ek olarak insani ve toplumsal yapılar da diplomasiin aktif aktörleri haline gelmişlerdir. Bu sebeple diplomatik hedef ve davranışlar başarılı olabilmeleri için*

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siyasal ve ekonomik sahalarla beraber sosyal ve cemiyet hayatının da pek çok safhasına hitap etmek durumundadırlar. Türk dış politikası da bu çerçevede özellikle Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisinin etkisinde ciddi bir değişim geçirmiştir. Bunlar içinde en belirginini ise giderek hızlanan proaktivitesidir. Bazı analizcilerin Yeni Osmanlılık olarak adlandırmış olduğu bu değişimler başlangıçtaki endişeleri haksız çıkaracak şekilde Türkiye'nin ABD ve AB gibi tarihi ve stratejik ortaklarıyla ilişkilerini koparmamıştır. Bunun aksine söz konusu değişiklikler Türk dış politikasına daha geniş bir odak ve daha öte bir eşik sunmuştur. Bu hareketlilik sadece ekonomi ve diplomasi ile işlememiş ancak Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nun kültür mirasını da bünyesine katmıştır. Bu mirasa yakın olan devletleri de öncelik olarak ele almıştır. Bu makale ilgili kültürel yakınlık unsurları ve değerlerinin proaktif bir dış politika-ya ne derece katkıda bulunacağını işlemektedir. Bu çerçevede Bangladeş örnek olay incelemesi hem literatürde çok az bir değerlendirmeye sahip olduğundan faydalı hem de sosyo-kültürel yakınlık ve ortaklıkların bozulan ilişkileri toparlamada ne derece başarılı olduğunu göstermede açık ve güncel bir örnek teşkil etmektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Proaktif dış politika, Türkiye, Bangladeş, Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi

## 1. INTRODUCTION

An academically well-discussed question of Turkish foreign policy was its proactivity, spurred by Justice and Development Party (AKP) with early 2000s. Unlike the US and the EU's concerns, AKP's proactivity did not detach Turkey from its historical and strategic ties but aimed to develop a more multi-faceted and global outlook via increasing Turkey's outreach to the Middle East, Africa, Asia-Pacific and Latin America. Against some analysts' opinions that AKP has been "punching above its weight" in many areas of regional and global politics, Turkey achieved considerable diplomatic, political and economic success.<sup>1</sup> One of these formerly not-well-focused areas of Turkish foreign policy was South Asia. This article examines one of the least elaborated<sup>2</sup> issues in this sense: Turkey-Bangladesh relations.

An important approach in AKP's proactivity is to merge histo-cultural and socio-cultural with economic and political aims. Cultural and historical communalities assumed to pave the way for AKP's proactive foreign policy objects. Bangladesh fits into this scheme. Turkey-Bangladesh relations is a good example of how economic/commercial relations can be nurtured from cultural commonalities and common values.

1 Soner Cagaptay, *The Rise of Turkey: The Twenty-First Century's First Muslim Power*, (Nebraska: Potomac Books, 2014); Ziya Meral and Jonathan Paris, 'Decoding Turkish Foreign Policy Hyperactivity', *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol.33, No.4, 2010, s. 75-86; Daniel Dombey, 'Turkey looks to punch above its weight' *Financial Times*, 27 September 2011; Ziya Öniş and Mustafa Kutlay, 'The dynamics of emerging middle-power influence in regional and global governance: the paradoxical case of Turkey', Vol. 71, No.2, 2017, s.164-183; Andrew F. Cooper and Jongryn Mo, 'Middle Middle Powers Can Punch Above Their Weight', *Wall Street Journal*, 4 November 2011; Helen Clark, 'Australia, MIKTA and the Middle Power Question', *The Diplomat*, 20 April 2015.

2 One academic article specifically examines the topic from a descriptive perspective in Turkish: Rahmat Ullah, 'Bangladeş ve Türkiye: İkili İlişkilerin bir Analizi', *Sosyal ve Beşeri Bilimleri Dergisi*, Vol.9, No. 1, 2017, pp.30-44

This article aims to draw an insight about these cultural and historical commonalities and how they help AKP to boost bilateral relations. It firstly elaborates the main elements and approach of Turkey's proactive foreign policy; secondly, gives a general descriptive framework of the history, politics, and economy of bilateral relations and try to support this with an analytical insight about the future of two countries relations. The article depicts this from Turkey's point of view.

AKP's proactive approach for its foreign policy behavior and aims is a requirement of the changes in global diplomacy. Changes in global diplomacy narrowed down the distance between foreign affairs (which is more about people-to-people relations) and foreign policy (which is about state-to-state relations via official agencies). Global diplomacy, today, does not operate only via agencies. With well-known and increasingly popular concepts of soft power and public diplomacy people-to-people relations became not only complementary to state-to-state relations but also an indispensable requirement. Foreign affairs rest on historical connections, cultural insights, religious beliefs, social values, and business ethics. AKP elite read this requirement carefully and re-calibrated its foreign policy as an amalgamation of social, historical and cultural commonalities with political and economic gains. Rather than repeating the full-fledged discussed elements of Turkey-Bangladesh relations gives an example of how this amalgamation was formed and operated.

## **2. PROACTIVE FOREIGN POLICY: A TURKISH MODEL?**

An important discussion in global diplomacy is about its evolution from bilateral to multilateral and towards 21<sup>st</sup> century's polyilateral diplomacy.<sup>3</sup> With this new version more and more stakeholders has been taking part in the formation and the application of diplomacy, which is called new multilateralism. The diplomacy of 21<sup>st</sup> century is more about the management of relations between states and other actors<sup>4</sup> including cultural and social agents/elements. With the "new" diplomacy, state-to-state relations (foreign policy) merged with people-to-people relations. For policy makers, it became almost a must to develop "ordinary people" related/relevant diplomatic practices in order to develop effective proactive diplomatic behavior.

AKP's proactive foreign policy followed Ahmet Davutoğlu's, who was Erdoğan's chief advisor from 2003 to 2009 and the Foreign Minister between 2009 and 2014, path until he became the Prime Minister. Davutoğlu's foreign policy merged with foreign affairs by resting on Ottoman Empire's cultural peculiarity and commonalities, which had their influence in the Middle East, Africa and many parts of Asia. With the refurbished foreign policy supported with an enhanced economy became more of a vibrant actor.

Not only Turkey's politico-economic awakening but also the new dynamics of the post-Cold War global politics facilitated AKP's proactivity. AKP carefully studied the ineffective, to a point unrealistic, foreign policy action in the very early stages of the post-Cold War, i.e. Turkey's argument to become the unofficial leader (or as a

3 Ilona Kickbusch, 'How is diplomacy changing', Graduate Institute Geneva, August 2012

4 Ronald Peter Barston, *Modern Diplomacy*, (London: Longmans, 2006)

Big Brother) of the Turkic states in Central Asia and the Caucasus. The ineffectiveness of these actions led AKP to develop a more sober and soft power and trade-oriented foreign policy.

For developing proactive and trade-oriented foreign policy, AKP needed to show to external world that the domestic environment is safe and profitable. Therefore AKP elites de-securitized formerly problematic issues and security threats.<sup>5</sup> In the 1990s Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK), political Islam, Iran and Syria were articulated as threats to national security, which were accepted and emphasized in the National Security Document in 1995.<sup>6</sup> AKP elites redefined these threats. They run successful reform packages for EU criteria, which were emphasized by the European Commission on 6 October 2004 in Regular Report on Turkey that Turkey fulfilled the Copenhagen political criteria and the Commission recommended the Council to open accession negotiations.<sup>7</sup> The Council decided to start accession negotiations with Turkey on 3 October 2005.<sup>8</sup> Another booster was Turkey's liberalization, more inclusion of civil society, business sphere<sup>9</sup> and direct/indirect aid via Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA) into foreign policy. With such combination Turkey began to act as a "trading state" via primarily peaceful cooperative relations with its partners.<sup>10</sup> It was also a partner-making process. Davutoğlu aimed to recalibrate the foreign policy with an eastern orientation.<sup>11</sup>

This recalibration was articulated as neo-Ottomanism. AKP member of the Parliament and member of the Parliamentary Commission on Foreign Affairs, Suat Kınıklıoğlu addressed that "While the neo-Ottoman outlook naturally embraces the Ottoman geopolitical space and has no qualms about being a proactive actor in this geography, the traditionally conservative foreign policy establishment remains reluctant to come out of the comfort of not being a significant player... Yet the rise and rapid embrace of neo-Ottoman thinking in foreign policy cannot be explained by the impact of events in our immediate neighborhood only. The ascendancy of Ottomanism in Turkish society is likely to continue for some time. The challenge for Turkey followers will be to see whether neo-Ottomanism will be able to turn into a coherent and well-articulated ideology that will provide the intellectual legitimacy

5 Bülent Aras and Rabia Karakaya Polat, 'From conflict to cooperation: desecuritization of Turkey's relations with Syria and Iran', *Security Dialogue*, Vol. 39, No. 5, 2008, pp 492-515.

6 For details see: Bulut Gürpınar, 'Milli Güvenlik Kurulu ve Dış Politika', *Uluslararası İlişkiler*, Vol. 10, No. 39, pp.73-104.

7 For the text see: [http://www.ab.gov.tr/files/AB\\_Iliskileri/Tur\\_En\\_Realitons/Progress/Turkey\\_Progress\\_Report\\_2004](http://www.ab.gov.tr/files/AB_Iliskileri/Tur_En_Realitons/Progress/Turkey_Progress_Report_2004), (accessed on 21 August 2017)

8 For the text see: [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/pdf/turkey/st20002\\_05\\_tr\\_framedoc\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/pdf/turkey/st20002_05_tr_framedoc_en), (accessed on 21 August 2017)

9 Altay Atlı, 'Businessmen as diplomats: the role of business associations in Turkey's foreign economic policy', *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 13, No.1, 2011, pp. 119-128.

10 Kemal Kirişçi, 'Turkey's "demonstrative effect" and the transformation of the Middle East', *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 13, No. 1, 2011, pp. 33-55; AO Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism before its Triumph*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977); see also: Andr Bank and Roy Karadağ (2013) 'The 'Ankara Moment': the politics of Turkey's regional power in the Middle East, 2007-11', *Third World Quarterly*, Vol.34, No.2, pp.287-304.

11 Ahmet Davutoğlu, "Turkey's Foreign Policy Vision: An Assessment of 2007", *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 10, No. 1, 2008.

to transform Turkey both domestically and regionally".<sup>12</sup> Neo-Ottomanism might not be elaborated as a significantly impactful foreign policy paradigm but more as a signal to the outside world that Turkey would like and aim to amplify its voice not only over its very neighborhood but also in far apart.

Such reorganization of foreign policy did not substantially change Turkey's stance towards its historical and strategic allies. Turkey and the US have been continuously cooperating in the Middle East. There have been hiccups in relations with the EU but we cannot talk about a real detachment, same with Israel. Even with Iran, Turkey has been favoring a diplomatic solution to the nuclear issue.

Although such orientation in foreign policy majorly focused on the Middle East, Asia also took its place. AKP policy makers' main criterion for choosing partners to deepen relations in Asia was either being "significantly" Muslim-populated or being shared cultural commonalities with Turkey or possibly the both. Six countries were firstly in Ankara's radar: China, Japan, Indonesia, Korea, Malaysia and Singapore. This was followed by opening new embassies in Naypidaw (Myanmar), Phnom Penh (Cambodia), Bandar Seri Begawan (Brunei). Turkey also took part in several regional/international organizations of Asian countries. Turkey's accession to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation of ASEAN in 2010 and membership of the Asia Cooperation Dialogue (ACD) in September 2013, as well as active participation in the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) as Post-Forum Dialogue Partner and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as Dialogue Partner. Ankara was also a founder of new international groupings covering a substantial part of Asia, i.e. MIKTA (acronym for Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea, Turkey, and Australia). As a "trading state" Turkey's bilateral trade with Asia (and Pacific) has increased in the last decade from 15 billion USD to 50 billion USD in 2014. Currently more than 1300 Turkish firms are operating in the region. Turkey concluded free trade agreements with South Korea, Malaysia and Singapore. Muslim communities' role and issues in the region are also under Ankara's focus. Turkey, in this sense, supports the Southern Thailand dialogue process and contributes to the Southern Philippines peace process. Turkey also follows the situation in Rohingya and Myanmar.<sup>13</sup> Although Bangladesh does not have an extensive weight in this respect, it is a clear example to show cultural commonalities could nurture Turkey's "trading state" skills.

### **3. TURKEY-BANGLADESH: CULTURE NURTURES ÉCONOMIE POLITIQUE**

Although Turkey and Bangladesh geographically are way far apart from each other their social and cultural elements have interesting similarities. As a matter of fact, historically speaking cultural commonalities and their influence was more exposed than institutional and political ties.

The most significant element of such commonalities is the way that the Bengalis see Turkish model of Islam. One major example was the significance of Sufism

<sup>12</sup> Suat Kınıklıoğlu, 'The return of Ottomanism', Today's Zaman, 27 March 2007.

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkeys-relations-with-east-asia-and-the-pacific.en.mfa>, (accessed on 21 August 2017)

within Bengali Muslims. Ottomans were great promoter of Sufism. Secondly, in the first quarter of 20<sup>th</sup> century Bengali Muslims supported the territorial integrity of Ottoman Empire.<sup>14</sup> They saw Ottoman Caliphate as a symbol of Muslim unity. Same group of Muslims started to Caliphate movement for protecting the Caliphate as an institution protected and run by the Ottoman reign. The movement organized various demonstrations in sub-Indian continent. They also established Indian Caliphate Committee in December 1921 and until 1923 they sent almost 800 thousand Turkish Liras to the Ottoman Army.<sup>15</sup>

Bengali Muslims' sympathy and support was not only to the institution of Caliphate but also to the Turkish nation, which took the legacy of Ottoman Anatolia. The interest and influence goes back to the 1920s to the Turkish War of Independence and particularly to Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Atatürk's influence could be seen in daily, educational and public spheres. The Muslims of South Asia including the Bengalis, had supported the War. The respect and admiration for Atatürk is reflected in the epic poem *Kamal Pasha*, written by Kazi Nazrul Islam, national poet of Bangladesh, in 1921.<sup>16</sup> This poem has been on the curriculum in Bangladesh schools. Besides, on major avenue in Dhaka and another one in Chittagong have been named as "Kemal Atatürk Avenue". Furthermore, a high school in Dagan Bhuiyan, in Feni and a Turkish language center in Dhaka Cantonment were named as "Atatürk Model High School" and "Mustafa Kemal Turkish Language Center". In the same vein, the support of the Bengal people during the Turkish War of Independence is still remembered with gratitude by the Turkish people.

Mevlana Celaleddin Rumi is also an influential figure in Bangladesh's cultural sphere. The second busiest airport of Bangladesh, formerly known as "Sylhet Airport" was renamed as Shahjalal International Airport to honor Hazrat Shah Jalal, one of the students of Mevlana Jalaluddin Rumi in Konya.

However, during 1965 India-Pakistan War, Turkey supported Pakistan via military equipment and medical personnel transfer.<sup>17</sup> During Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971, the relations were very complicated due to Turkey's continued support for Pakistan.<sup>18</sup> After Pakistan's defeat, Bangladesh was established, Turkey recognized Bangladesh as a state on 22 February 1974 on the occasion of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation Summit in Lahore.<sup>19</sup> Turkey was one of the first countries recognizing the independence of Bangladesh. The Turkish Embassy in Dhaka was opened in 1976 and the Embassy of Bangladesh in Ankara in 1981.

14 Sufia Ahmed, *Khilafat Movement*, [http://en.banglapedia.org/index.php?title=Khilafat\\_Movement](http://en.banglapedia.org/index.php?title=Khilafat_Movement), (accessed on 21 August 2017)

15 For details see: Salih Pay, 'Indian Muslims, Ottoman Empire and Caliphate during Colonial Period', *International Journal of Business and Social Science*, Vol. 6, No. 2, 2015, pp. 284-289; Muhammad Mojum Khan, *The Muslim Heritage of Bengal*, (Leicestershire: Kube Publishing, 2013).

16 <http://dhaka.emb.mfa.gov.tr/>, (accessed on 21 August 2017)

17 S.M. Burke and Lawrence Ziring, *Pakistan's foreign policy: an historical analysis*, (Karachi : Oxford University Press, 1990), 354.

18 *Milliyet*, 'Pakistan'a Cephane\_Yollayacağız', 14 December 1971.

19 Munir Hussain, 'Pak-Turkey relations: On the common ties', *Alternatives*, Vol. 7, No.2, 2008, pp. 67-85, 117.



Yet these cultural influences were not transformed into deeper commercial and/or political relations. In foreign policy sphere it is not that easy to claim that Turkish-Bangladesh relations have been very deep and strong and mostly since Asia-Pacific region has not been one of Turkey foreign policy focuses until the AKP's change of action.

### 3.1. Development of Relations

Establishment of official bilateral relations goes back to the end of 1970s. Former Bangladesh President Ziaur Rahman became the first Bangladeshi head of state to visit Ankara.<sup>20</sup> In 1982 Turkish President Kenan Evren and in 1986, the Turkish Prime Minister, Turgut Özal paid visits to Bangladesh. Turkish President Süleyman Demirel joined Nelson Mandela and Yasser Arafat at the silver jubilee celebrations of Bangladesh's independence in 1997. In 1998, the two countries co-founded the Developing 8 Countries group (D-8). In October 1999 Bangladesh President Sahabuddin Ahmed visited Turkey, which was followed by Bangladesh President Zillur Rahman's visit in November 2009.

Until 2009, Turkey and Bangladesh concluded several agreements. The agreements cover various issues, i.e. trade, economic and technical cooperation, culture, military training and education, banking, maritime/shipping, double taxation.<sup>21</sup> In 2007 Turkey-Bangladesh Chamber of Commerce and Industry was founded.

2009 was the turning point in bilateral relations. With the spurring of proactivity in Turkish foreign policy, Ankara began to increase Turkey's clout in previously discarded parts of the world. South Asia was one of them. Accordingly, President Abdullah Gül visited Bangladesh in February 2010. During the visit Turkish and Bengali officials decided to establish Turkey-Bangladesh Business Council.<sup>22</sup>

Bilateral relations diversified and began to deepen especially with the Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's visit to Dhaka in 2010. Erdoğan's visit was the first Turkish Prime Ministerial visit to Bangladesh after 21 years with an extensive agenda. Erdoğan's agenda conforms to Asian inter-state relations *modus operandi*, which is primarily economic-commercial. Erdoğan stated that even increased trade volume from 47 million to 658 million USD from 2002 to 2009 did not reflect the actual potential between two countries. Erdoğan's wish was to increase this volume to 3 billion USD for 2015. Although the commercial relations could not quite catch this volume, in 2016 the import and export values were doubled, climbed up to 1 billion USD.<sup>23</sup> During the visit Turkish and Bangladesh leaders also discussed cooperation in health, tourism, education and terrorism.<sup>24</sup>

20 Bernard Kennedy, 'Ambassador Rezaqul Haider: mediating for commerce', *Diplomat*, 14 December 2005, pp. 3-14.

21 For the full list see: [www.mofa.gov.bd](http://www.mofa.gov.bd)

22 <https://www.deik.org.tr/asia-pacific-business-councils-turkey-bangladesh-business-council>, (accessed on 21 August 2017).

23 For details see: [www.ekonomi.gov.tr](http://www.ekonomi.gov.tr)

24 Turkey, Bangladesh forge links, seek higher cooperation in trade, 15 November 2010, <https://www.turkishnews.com/en/content/2010/11/15/turkey-bangladesh-forge-links-seek-higher-cooperation-in-trade/>, (accessed on 21 August 2017).

Erdoğan's visit was a clear depiction for AKP's proactivity in Bangladesh. His arguments and agenda showed the trade-oriented focus of new Turkish foreign policy. Erdoğan did not stress problematic issues of the past, i.e. with Pakistan, but utilized cultural commonalities to harvest a greater trade output.

Erdoğan's efforts were well received by Bangladesh elites. Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina responded to Erdoğan's visit in 2011 during the UN's the Least Developed Countries Conference<sup>25</sup>. During the visit several cooperation schemes were concluded on customs, mutual protection of investments, technical and scientific cooperation, visa exemption for official, diplomatic passports. On the occasion of the Summit the Turkey-Bangladesh Business Council was assigned as the official actor for improving bilateral trade and industrial cooperation, especially by trying to increase the number of Turkish companies' presence and network in Bangladesh. This also shows how Turkey utilized international platforms to assert its cause to carve out more politico-economical gains.

Turkey's efforts continued in 2012. Since then, Bangladesh and Turkey have been in talks to sign a free trade agreement. Bangladesh and Turkey have signed a joint protocol on trade and investment in 2012. The Bangladesh-Turkey Joint Economic Commission has been holding biennial meetings to discuss the ways for increasing bilateral trade and investment. Same year, Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA) increased its activities in Bangladesh. The agency opened 10 medical clinics, computer labs, education centers. The activities are currently on education, health, agriculture, and supporting administrative infrastructures.<sup>26</sup>

In 2013, Turkey supplied Otokar Cobra light armored vehicles to the Bangladesh Army.<sup>27</sup> Bangladesh signed an agreement with Turkey on military training, education and joint cooperation between forces of both nations on 10 March 1981 at Dhaka. According to the military cooperation agreement signed in 2008, Turkey provides military equipment to one Bangladesh military unit once every year. As per agreement Turkey's Naval special forces trained Bangladesh Navy's special forces Special Warfare Diving and Salvage.<sup>28</sup>

Two countries made this bilateral interaction/influence more exposed by showing their cordiality more visible in daily life. One street in Dakka and another one in Chittagong were named as "Kemal Atatürk" and the Turkish language training center in Dakka military headquarters was named as "Mustafa Kemal". In Ankara two streets were named as "Sheikh Mucib-ür-Rahman" ve "Zia-ür-Rahman".<sup>29</sup>

Yet this cordiality was not free of strain. Developments in 2016 shook the deepening of bilateral relations.

25 <http://unohrlls.org/about-ldcs/istanbul-programme-of-action/>, (accessed on 21 August 2017).

26 For details see: [www.tika.gov.tr](http://www.tika.gov.tr)

27 <https://defence.pk/pdf/threads/bangladesh-army-awards-1-billion-apc-contract-to-turkey.511084/page-2>, (accessed on 21 August 2017).

28 For details see: <https://defence.pk/pdf/threads/turkey-bd-can-take-joint-steps-in-defense-industry-turkish-pm-erdogan.172595/>, (accessed on 21 August 2017).

29 Rahmat Ullah, 'Bangladesh ve Türkiye: İkili İlişkilerin bir Analizi', Sosyal ve Beşeri Bilimleri Dergisi, Vol.9, No. 1, 2017, pp.30-44, 39.



### 3.2. Freezing of Relations

In 2016, the diplomatic relations between two countries became complex when Bangladesh denounced Turkey's consecutive requests to free several Bangladeshi Jamaat-e-Islami leaders who have been convicted for war crimes during Bangladesh Liberation War by the International Crimes Tribunal in Bangladesh in 2013. When Moulana Motiur Rahman Nizami, chief of the Jamaat-e-Islami, Bangladesh's biggest Islamic Political Party Jamaat-e-Islami and an alliance of the ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party, was executed on 11 May 2016.<sup>30</sup>

Turkey withdrew its Ambassador. This was followed by a handful of protests in Turkey against the execution. Erdoğan on 12 May expressed his deep regret about the execution of a political leader. He also stated that Nizami, as a political leader, did not deserve such punishment and execution. Erdoğan claimed that 'Nizami had not committed any "earthly sins," and described the Bangladeshi authorities' handling of his trial as undemocratic'.<sup>31</sup>

Even if the relations were strained, the socio-cultural and historical affinities prevented the bilateral relations from tearing off. Current Bangladesh Ambassador in Ankara, M. Allama Siddiki, stated that, he was sure that during the time of the above-explained crisis, the politico-cultural closeness between Turkey and Bangladesh was much stronger and bigger than any bilateral issue.<sup>32</sup> This also illustrates that people-to-people relations always have a potential to heal state-to-state affairs.

### 3.3. Revitalization of Relations

As, it was expected, the relations revived pretty quickly. After Bangladesh's condemnation of the coup d'état attempt to overthrow the Erdoğan government on 15 July 2016, relations began to improve. Consequently, Ankara sent a new ambassador to Dhaka. After arrival, the new Turkish ambassador remarked, 'Bangladesh had helped Turkey by expressing its support to Erdoğan's government after the failed coup attempt'. The ambassador commented that the relations between the two countries have become normal, and even has the potential to be deepened in sensitive strategic issues, i.e. in helping Bangladesh to control militancy in the country.<sup>33</sup>

In 2017, a committee of representatives from Bangladesh Export Promotion Bureau, Investment Development Authority and Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce and Industry visited Turkey in April-May. Several seminars organized in Turkey on trade and investment, which were attended by 140 Turkish businessmen, industrialists, and investors. There again it was emphasized that 1.2 billion USD of bilateral trade volume is way below the actual potential. In order to increase this volume it was argued that Turkish companies should invest more in areas of petro-chemical, construction, hotel, tourism, and health care in Bangladesh. For such acceleration

30 Samuel Ramani, 'Can Bangladesh and Turkey Mend Frayed Ties?', *The Diplomat*, 4 July, 2016.

31 *Ibid.*

32 Personal interview with Ambassador M. Allama Siddiki, 15 August 2017.

33 Sheikh Shahariar Zaman, 'Turkey wants to restore ties with Bangladesh', 9 September 2016, <http://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2016/09/09/turkey-wants-restore-ties-bangladesh/>, (accessed on 21 August 2017).

Turkish businessmen urged the Bangladesh authorities to further improve/liberalize banking, customs, and taxation systems. The need for foreign direct investments in order to overcome some trading difficulties were also articulated.<sup>34</sup> The increasing cordiality between two countries' businessmen and officials also strengthen Turkey's connections with the East regarding their growing tensions with Europe and restive environment in the neighborhood.

#### 4. FUTURE POTENTIAL AND NEEDS

Turkey and Bangladesh have historical and continuously deepening cultural commonalities, which facilitates developing politico-economic ties. Moreover developing these relations have an obvious win-win situation for both.

Turkey has been aiming to develop its relations with Asia but has been also searching for a platform and/or partners. Ankara's attempts to move closer to ASEAN as becoming a sectoral dialogue partner, Shanghai Cooperation Organization's dialogue partner since 2013, being an active member of MIKTA with 3 members from Asia-Pacific are three considerable actions. A significant modus operandi of Asian international affairs is administering inter-governmental relations via bilateral interactions. Turkish-Bangladesh relations requires attention in this sense. Ankara needs to boost its bilateral relations in Asia if it aims to increase its clout in the region.

Another important requirement in this sense is to pragmatically compartmentalize the issues of bilateral relations. Trade and security related issues could top the agenda and any sort of politically spikey bits could be pushed down in the bilateral relations list.

Another requirement for Turkey is to increase its clout for the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which has become China's most ambitious foreign trade and investment project in its 13th Five-Year Plan, potentially similar in size to the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement, previously proposed by the U.S. China's 2017 Government Work Report identified the BRI as an anchor for expansion and enhancement of the "opening up" policy, with international capacity cooperation as a key component. Turkey clearly sees the BRI as building its role as the land and sea transportation hub to Europe from Asia. Many of the Turkish scholars saw its potential to revive trade and investment for their own businesses while unlocking development in countries along the Silk routes. Given Turkey's own changing attitude about the European Union, many Turkish experts believed that the BRI positions them advantageously. Again to make itself more relevant for BRI, Turkey is in need of increasing the number of partners in Asia, and Bangladesh is obviously a very useful one.

For Bangladesh, cooperating with Turkey has obvious advantages regarding counter-terrorism against the Islamic Chattrra Shibir, the Ansarullah Bangla Team, and Hizbut Tahrir, iron and steel, textile, and chemical material industries. Turkey's foreign direct investments would also be indisputable help for Bangladesh economy.

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34 Personal interview with Ambassador M. Allama Siddiki, 15 August 2017.

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