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**ERDOĞAN'S LONG GAME FOR REGIONAL LEADERSHIP?
A STUDY OF TURKISH ISLAMIC OUTREACH IN TUNISIA AND IRAN**

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Table of Contents

<i>Executive Summary</i>	2
<i>Introduction</i>	3
<i>Context and literature review – What do we know about Turkish soft power?</i>	4
Soft Power and Religious Diplomacy in the MENA Region	5
Turkey's foreign policy under the AKP	6
Turkish Soft Power and “Erdogan's Arm”: A Holistic Strategy to Boost Turkey's Image	8
The Viability of the Turkish/AKP “Model”	10
Religion's place in Turkish–Iranian Relations	11
Implications for this study: filling a gap in the existing literature	13
<i>Study Design – Paired Case Media Survey</i>	14
Case selection	14
Methodology	16
<i>Study Findings – Assessing Turkish Islamic Outreach in the MENA Region</i>	18
Turkish Soft Power in the MENA Region	18
Turkish Cultural Diplomacy and Islamic Outreach in Tunisia – A Holistic Strategy with a Limited Religious Component.....	19
Maintaining a Friendly Distance in Tunisia.....	22
Turkey's religious diplomacy towards Iran, deliberately transcending sectarianism	23
Assessing the Impact of Turkish Cultural Diplomacy in Tunisia	25
Iranian reception of Turkish Islamic outreach, enthusiastic silence	30
<i>Conclusions and recommendations for further research</i>	35
Recommendations for further research.....	38
<i>About the Authors:</i>	39
<i>Bibliography</i>	40

Executive Summary

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* – AKP) brought to power with it a new vision for Turkey's place in the world. Instead of Turkey's identity being defined peripherally, as NATO's southern flank or a half-in, half-out, quasi-member of the European Union, the AKP reimagined Turkey as a new world power that would draw its strength from asserting its historical and cultural ties to the Middle East and North Africa. The path to becoming a great power articulated by the AKP requires discarding the Turkish Republic's "pseudo-European" identity; only by embracing a re-imagined Ottoman past and Islamic identity¹ would Turkey gain the strategic depth² to be accepted as a regional leader. Does the AKP's foreign policy doctrine give Turkey a natural advantage in its foreign relations because, as expressed recently by President Erdoğan, it is at home "in the fertile geography of the Islamic world?"³

This empirical study examines two cases of Turkey's use of religious overtures in its foreign relations to understand the extent of these efforts (i.e., the level of "supply"), as well as to assess how they are received (or the amount of "demand"). Does emphasizing its historic ties and religious commonalities with Tunisia afford Turkey special influence there? Does Islamic outreach enable Turkey and Iran to move towards resolving their conflict over Syria and other policy disagreements on the basis of shared religious values? This study finds that Islamic outreach does not transcend existing challenges for Turkey in the domestic contexts where these outreach efforts are employed. The charged partisan environment in Tunisia limits the reach of Turkish Islamic messaging; therefore, Ankara's soft power apparatus settles for maintaining a friendly distance, rather than adopting a bolder public diplomacy strategy that could pay greater dividends in advancing its foreign policy goals. In Iran, despite an active program of elite-level

The authors extend their heartfelt thanks to Doctors Lisel Hintz, Nathan Brown, Shana Marshall, Ahmet Erdi Öztürk, Ceren Lord, and Annelle Sheline for their encouragement, insight, and generosity with their time.

¹ The AKP claims that Turkey rises by emphasizing its Islamic character. Such a narrative projects the same essentializing discourse of western orientalist back onto Turkey, nevertheless the narrative of Turkey as the "bearer of Islamic civilization" appeals to Turkish Islamists. Ceren Lord, conversation with the authors, April 29, 2020.

² Strategic depth is influence Turkey can access by embracing the legacy bequeathed it by history. The concept was proposed by Ahmet Davutoğlu. (chief adviser to Prime Minister Erdoğan 2003–2009, Minister of Foreign Affairs 2009–2014, Prime Minister 2014–2016)

³ "President Erdoğan: We feel ourselves at home here in the fertile geography of the Islamic world," AK Parti, February 14, 2020, <https://www.akparti.org.tr/en/news/president-erdogan-we-feel-ourselves-at-home-here-in-the-fertile-geography-of-the-islamic-world-14-02-2020-10-59-23/>.

religious diplomacy, Turkey's attempts to create diplomatic inroads are eclipsed by the Islamic Republic's obsession with its security interests in Syria. Although the AKP believes that shared Islamic history and culture gives Turkey an advantage in pursuing its foreign policy objectives in Muslim-majority contexts, emphasizing Turkey's religious character has not been a panacea for difficulties in its relations in the MENA region.

Introduction

Beginning in the early 2000s the international news media, academia, and the policy community took interest in the foreign policy of Turkey,⁴ which under the leadership of the AKP, President Erdoğan, and former Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Ahmet Davutoğlu had begun to assert itself in the intraregional affairs of the Middle East and North Africa,⁵ as well as to play a more active role in Muslim communities globally.⁶ The so-called “Turkish Model” – whose popular conception is described by Cihan Tuğal as “‘Islamic liberalism’: [the] marriage of formal democracy, free market capitalism and (a toned down) conservative Islam” – emerged as a model for other MENA states, and was considered to be an effective counterweight to the less desirable forms of political Islam propagated by Iran and jihadist groups like Al-Qaeda.⁷

Especially in the aftermath of the Arab Spring protests of 2010-2011, it appeared that Turkey – “as a Muslim nation that was democratic, secular, integrated into the world economy, and part of key Western institutions like NATO”⁸ – had found a winning formula that enjoyed widespread support in the Arab world and would be adopted throughout the region.⁹

⁴ Ömer Taspinar, *Turkey's Middle East Policies Between Neo-Ottomanism and Kemalism* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2008), 13, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep13064>.

⁵ Birce Altıok Karşiyaka and Sinan Karşiyaka, “Recalibrating Turkish Foreign Policy After the Arab Uprisings: From Pro-activism to Uncertainty by Easing Off Ideational and Liberal Goals,” In *Contemporary Turkey at a Glance II: Turkey Transformed? Power, History, Culture*, edited by Meltem Ersoy and Esra Ozyurek (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2017), 163-176. doi:10.1007/978-3-658-16021-0.

⁶ Ahmet Erdi Öztürk, “Turkey: An Ambivalent Religious Soft Power,” *Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs at Georgetown University*, <https://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/posts/turkey-an-ambivalent-religious-soft-power>.

⁷ Cihan Tuğal, *The Fall of the Turkish Model: How the Arab Uprisings Brought Down Islamic Liberalism* (London: Verso, 2016). 4-5.

⁸ Gönül Tol, and Birol Baskan, *From “Hard Power” to “Soft Power” and Back Again: Turkish Foreign Policy in the Middle East* (Washington, DC: Middle East Institute, 2018), <https://www.mei.edu/publications/hard-power-soft-power-and-back-again-turkish-foreign-policy-middle-east>.

⁹ Tuğal, *The Fall of the Turkish Model*.

Additionally, Ankara's significant investment in global soft power efforts under Erdoğan enabled it to, in the words of his special advisor İbrahim Kalın, "[effectively communicate] ... the new 'Turkish story' as a rising power."¹⁰ However, Turkey's star began to fade by 2013 as domestic political unrest and a move toward authoritarianism,¹¹ as well as the failure of Turkish foreign policy in Syria,¹² chipped away at its popularity as a model for other Middle Eastern states. Is Turkey's soft power strategy still relevant in today's Middle East?

In this context, our research explores how Turkey leverages soft power in the MENA region, focusing on what we term "Islamic outreach" – or Ankara's use of Islam to maintain cordial bilateral relations as well as popular affinity – in two states that could hardly be more dissimilar: Tunisia and Iran. Although the ongoing COVID-19 global pandemic has prevented our team from conducting in-person field research as originally planned, our review of the publicly-available academic literature, government publications, news media, and social media, as well as remote consultations with academic experts, has revealed several surprising insights. We found that contrary to our initial expectations, in the MENA region Ankara's religious diplomacy is not nearly as extensive as it is in other parts of the world, nor as robust as other aspects of its soft power strategy. With regard to the two cases of our study, the religious outreach that Turkey does conduct attracts a surprising amount of elite engagement from Iran, while in Tunisia divided public opinion has limited it to a greater extent than expected.

Context and literature review – What do we know about Turkish soft power?

What is soft power, and how is it relevant to the politically volatile Middle East? Why does Turkey invest in it, and how does it do so? This review addresses each of these questions in order to set the stage for assessing the effectiveness of Ankara's Islamic outreach.

¹⁰ İbrahim Kalın, "Soft Power and Public Diplomacy in Turkey." *Perceptions* 16, no. 3 (2011), 5-23. <https://search-proquest-com.proxygw.wrlc.org/docview/993151068?accountid=11243>.

¹¹ Monica Marks, "Tunisia's Islamists and the 'Turkish Model'," *Journal of Democracy* 28, no. 1 (2017): 103, 112, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/645541>.

¹² Michelangelo Guida and Oğuzhan Göksel, *Reevaluating the Sources and Fragility of Turkey's Soft Power After the Arab Uprisings* (Cham: Springer, 2017), 151-168. [doi:10.1007/978-3-319-59897-0_10](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-59897-0_10).

Soft Power and Religious Diplomacy in the MENA Region

Soft power as theorized by Joseph Nye is “the ability to affect others through the co-optive means of framing the agenda, persuading, and eliciting positive attraction in order to obtain preferred outcomes,”¹³ or “the ability to get what you want by attraction rather than coercion or payment.”¹⁴ Even though Nye’s work focuses on the challenge posed by China to American global hegemony, the theoretical framework of soft power is applicable to a study of Turkey’s foreign policy in the Middle East. Turkey’s ability to most effectively wield hard power – military force or economic pressure – is contingent upon it first convincing others in the region of the legitimacy of its actions. To do so it must enter the arena of ideational contestation. Historically, the MENA region has been an especially competitive arena for contestation over identity and ideology due to the lack of both a regional hegemon and intraregional cooperation, as well as the continued salience of sub- and supranational identities.¹⁵ In this context the religious sphere represented both a threat and an opportunity to the legitimacy of newly-formed MENA states, and throughout the 20th century they progressively institutionalized and regulated it: “[n]early all post-independence states [in the Middle East] — including even the most avowedly secularist like Atatürk’s Turkey — saw religion as something intertwined with the state, to be managed and deployed against opponents in a near continuous battle for control over the public sphere.”¹⁶

This contestation over religion and legitimacy took place not only domestically, but also internationally, and has had wide and long-lasting effects. Perhaps the best example of this is Saudi Arabia’s global exportation of Wahhabism beginning in the 1960s, which was initially intended to combat Gamal Abdel Nasser’s secular pan-Arabism and Soviet-aligned leftism in general, but following the 1979 revolution evolved into a bulwark against Iranian revolutionary Islam as well as “Iran’s influence on its own significant Shia minority population.”¹⁷ The instrumentalization of religion for foreign policy ends has not abated in the 21st century; to the

¹³ Joseph S. Nye Jr., *The Future of Power* (New York: Public Affairs, 2011), 45.

¹⁴ Joseph S. Nye Jr., “Soft Power,” *Leadership Excellence* 25, no. 4 (2008), 10.

¹⁵ For further study of the role of identities in the Middle East see, for example, *Dialogues in Arab Politics* by Michael Barnett or *The International Politics of the Middle East* by Raymond Hinnebusch.

¹⁶ Shadi Hamid and Peter Mandaville, *Islam as Statecraft: How Governments use Religion in Foreign Policy* (Washington, DC: Brookings, 2018), 5, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/islam-as-statecraft-how-governments-use-religion-in-foreign-policy/>.

¹⁷ Hamid and Mandaville, *Islam as Statecraft*, 10.

contrary, in light of “a fraying liberal consensus,” and declining US global leadership, Muslim-majority states are increasingly turning to Islam as a “resonant political currency and resource” in order to further their domestic and foreign policy goals, “seek[ing] to establish bedrocks of cultural familiarity and favorable attitudes in countries targeted for economic and security partnerships.”¹⁸ As this study will explore later, Turkey has increasingly turned to Islamic outreach as a part of its overall public diplomacy strategy and as a means of advancing its domestic and foreign policy priorities.

Turkey's foreign policy under the AKP

A brief exploration of the evolution of Turkish foreign policy under the AKP is warranted, as it helps explain Ankara's increasing interest and involvement in the MENA region. Former Foreign and Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, who advocated for deeper engagement with the Middle East, plays a central role in most accounts of this evolution. Davutoğlu, a former professor of international relations, advocated for a concept of strategic depth, which was intended to transform Turkey into a global power by shedding its identity as a periphery state and assuming a stabilizing role at the center of a culturally and economically integrated region. Through diplomatic engagement based on mutual respect, Turkish mediation of disputes would create a durable regional peace where all would benefit in an expanding sum game. This foreign policy initiative is commonly referred to as the “zero problems” policy.¹⁹

Turkey's “zero problems” foreign policy can be understood in three phases, described by Karşıyaka and Karşıyaka as expansion, activism, and recalibration. From 2002 to 2007, Turkey accumulated soft power as it pursued liberal principles of cultural engagement and free trade with its neighbors. During this period visa-free travel was established with many of its neighbors, and regional trade volume between Turkey and the Arab states increased several-fold, as did investment. From 2007 to 2011, Turkey actively mediated conflicts in the region including Syria and Israel in the Golan Heights; separately, alongside Brazil, Ankara successfully negotiated a fuel-swap deal with Iran. Davutoğlu's “zero problems” policy appeared to be vindicated as surveys of Arab publics found they held an 80% favorability rating of Turkey.²⁰

¹⁸ Hamid and Mandaville, *Islam as Statecraft*, 2-4.

¹⁹ Blake Hounshell, “Mr. ‘Zero Problems’,” *Foreign Policy*, no. 183 (2010): 45, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2010/11/28/mr-zero-problems/>.

²⁰ Karşıyaka and Karşıyaka, “Recalibrating Turkish Foreign Policy After the Arab Uprisings,” 150-152.

The transformation of Middle East's geopolitical environment following the Arab Spring led to greater Turkish involvement in the region than at any point in its modern history. Soner Çağaptay argues that Turkey under Erdoğan and Davutoğlu was "initially lukewarm toward the Arab uprisings" and later pivoted "from caution to attempting to curb or manipulate the inevitable disorder and instability in Arab-majority countries in its fav[o]r."²¹ Following the Arab uprisings, Turkey continued a proactive foreign policy of engagement, mediation, and forming partnerships with Muslim Brotherhood-aligned political parties.²²

However, because of the proliferation of new and conflicting actors in regional politics, Turkey was unable to remain non-partisan as its diplomatic initiatives were supported by some parties but rejected by others. Çağaptay argues that Erdoğan likely possesses a deep-seated affinity for the Muslim Brotherhood and Brotherhood-aligned Sunni Islamist parties that stems from his identity as the "democratically elected head of a political Islamist party" and his experience of having been marginalized and imprisoned under secular military rule during the 1990s.²³ Ankara therefore attempted to support and guide MB-related parties in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, seeking to "revive Turkey's greatness in the Middle East through Ikhwan-related and AKP-affiliated parties, which would look to Erdoğan as the region's primary influencer."²⁴ Turkey's increasingly partisan engagement in Arab politics eroded its credibility as a mediator, and within a few years of the uprisings positive views of Turkey among Arab publics declined sharply.²⁵ As the uprisings turned into proxy wars between regional powers, Turkish foreign policy underwent readjustment to reflect an environment no longer amenable to Turkish mediation. The foreign ministry incrementally shifted policies to prioritize security goals over the creation of a liberal regional order.²⁶

Alternatively, Turkey's pursuit of strategic depth and its "zero problems" foreign policy can be described in entirely pragmatic terms. This argument attributes Turkey's reorientation towards the Middle East under the AKP as a calculated decision to open markets for Turkey's

²¹ Soner Çağaptay, *Erdoğan's Empire: Turkey and the Politics of the Middle East* (I.B. Tauris: London), 105.

²² Çağaptay, *Erdoğan's Empire*, 72.

²³ Çağaptay, *Erdoğan's Empire*, 96.

²⁴ Çağaptay, *Erdoğan's Empire*, 184.

²⁵ Karşıyaka and Karşıyaka, "Recalibrating Turkish Foreign Policy After the Arab Uprisings," 158.

²⁶ Süleyman Elik, "The Arab Spring and Turkish-Iranian Relations, 2011-2016," In *Turkey's Relations with the Middle East: Political Encounters After the Arab Spring*, edited by Hüseyin Işıksal and Oğuzhan Göksel (Cham: Springer, 2018), 107.

export-driven economy and to secure energy resources for Turkish industry. By this explanation, the revival of Ottoman universalism and cultural outreach are no more than window dressing to a policy that the Kemalist Republican People's Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi – CHP) would easily have pursued.²⁷

We disagree with attempts to reduce Ankara's decision to engage with the Middle East to simple economic motivations – there is also a strong domestic component to Ankara's foreign policy. Lisel Hintz argues that Turkish foreign policy is a product of domestic identity contestation under both secular governments and the AKP. Competing Turkish identity proposals therefore seek to implement foreign policies that institutionalize their interpretation of Turkish identity,²⁸ whether that is close security ties with western institutions like NATO or economic integration and cultural ties with the Muslim world.

Turkish Soft Power and "Erdoğan's Arm": A Holistic Strategy to Boost Turkey's Image

How is Turkish soft power distinct from that of other states? Just as our study seeks to situate Islamic outreach within Turkey's regional foreign policy strategy, Nye argues that soft power is best used as part of a holistic foreign policy strategy.²⁹ Erdoğan appreciated the potential of soft power early into his presidency, "encourag[ing] Turkish businesses and civil society organi[z]ations to establish businesses, schools and cultural cent[er]s overseas, promoting Turkish culture and influence."³⁰ This was followed by a massive investment in government soft power institutions that now have a global footprint, and Turkey today arguably has the most holistic and robust soft power apparatus among the regional states, incorporating cultural (including religious) diplomacy, humanitarian and developmental aid, and secular and religious education. Sinem Adar and Halil Yenigün argue that the purpose of Turkey's massive investment in public diplomacy over the past decade is to "systematically target gaining global recognition

²⁷ Stefano Torelli, "The "AKP Model" and Tunisia's Al-Nahda: From Convergence to Competition?" *Insight Turkey* 14, no. 3 (2012), 65.

²⁸ Lisel Hintz, *Identity Politics Inside Out: National Identity Contestation and Foreign Policy in Turkey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 19.

²⁹ Nye, *The Future of Power*, 26.

³⁰ Çağaptay, *Erdoğan's Empire*, 191.

and validation for Turkey as the leader of the Muslim world and patron of the Muslim masses worldwide.”³¹

Ahmet Erdi Öztürk describes Ankara's soft power approach using the metaphor of an arm and the fingers of a hand. The state receives guidance from Erdoğan—the arm that directs the hand—and like the fingers of a hand working together, Turkey's various cultural diplomacy, humanitarian, and development organizations act in concert to advance Erdoğan's goals. The Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı (Presidency of Religious Affairs, or simply the Diyanet) and the Turkish Diyanet Foundation (Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı, or TDV), Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA), Turkish Maaref Foundation, Yunus Emre Foundation, Turkish Red Crescent (Türk Kızılay), etc., all form part of a coordinated soft power apparatus.³² Within this soft power framework, Islamic outreach functions to build trust and open avenues for persuasion. The AKP has specifically used the Diyanet as a tool of religious diplomacy as part of an integrative foreign policy based on shared culture and values in other Muslim-majority states.³³ Even though hosting a conference of religious scholars or building a mosque appears to meet no immediate foreign policy goals, doing so may give legitimacy to other Turkish policies framed in Islamic terms because Turkey is seen as conducting a foreign policy in line with Islamic values. Islamic outreach thus may create sympathies for Turkish values within MENA societies that would not otherwise be possible.

Over the past decade Turkey has conducted extensive religious outreach in the Balkans, Sub-Saharan Africa, Western Europe, North America, and even Latin America; however, there is little publicly-available information concerning similar efforts among the Arab states or with Iran. One explanation for this dearth of literature is that Turkey conducts little Islamic outreach in Arab countries, where “[m]any ... still see Turkey as an imperial power,”³⁴ while Iran and Turkey still view each other as geopolitical competitors. An initial hypothesis of this project was that Turkey's global religious outreach, which is very well-funded (the Diyanet has a budget of \$1.6 billion for 2020, exceeding the budgets of eight ministries, including ministries of interior

³¹ Sinem Adar and Halil Ibrahim Yenigün, “A Muslim Counter-Hegemony?: Turkey's Soft Power Strategies and Islamophobia,” *Jadaliyya*, May 5, 2019, <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/38646>.

³² Ahmet Erdi Öztürk, conversation with the authors, March 26, 2020.

³³ Ahmet Erdi Öztürk and Semiha Sözeri, “Diyanet as a Turkish Foreign Policy Tool: Evidence from the Netherlands and Bulgaria,” *Politics and Religion* 11, no. 3 (2018), 624-648. doi:10.1017/S175504831700075X.

³⁴ Ibid.

and foreign affairs),³⁵ remains a logical soft power tool to further its foreign policy goals in the MENA region, especially because – and as the literature indicates – its “hard power,” derived from economic strength and political institutions, appears to be weakening.

Moreover, even if – as much of the literature indicates – Turkey's soft power initiatives have had limited effectiveness since 2013, this does not also mean that Ankara has ceased them – especially its religious diplomacy. Far from being abandoned, religious diplomacy features prominently in Turkey's new foreign policy approach. Separately, this narrative of waning Turkish soft power in the MENA region is countered by Monica Marks' study of attitudes toward the AKP among members of the Islamist democratic Tunisian Ennahda Movement, who as of 2017 still viewed the latter as a model.³⁶ And writing in 2019, Adar and Yenigün argue that Ankara is still attempting to “position itself as a hegemonic actor within the transnational Muslim space,” and that its soft power efforts “have so far been effective in garnering wider appeal, both at the mass and elite level, despite Turkey's ongoing democratic decay.”³⁷

The Viability of the Turkish/AKP “Model”

According to Nye, the perceived legitimacy and underlying attractiveness of a state are key to its soft power³⁸ – without these, Ankara's global public diplomacy would be a waste of valuable resources. Although Turkish cultural diplomacy in the MENA region has not been studied extensively in the academic literature, several scholars have discussed the attractiveness and viability of the “Turkish model” for Arab states following the Arab Spring. Monica Marks argues that Ennahda and the AKP are in many respects much closer than the AKP and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood – a comparison that has received more attention, scholarly or otherwise.³⁹ Marks goes on to draw distinctions between Ennahda's consensus-oriented approach and the AKP's increasingly authoritarian trajectory; however, her interviews with

³⁵ “Diyanet'in 2020 bütçesi sekiz bakanlığı geride bıraktı, bütçenin 125 milyon lirası derneklere aktarılacak,” (Diyanet's 2020 budget greater than 8 ministries, 125 million lira from the budget to be transferred to associations), *T24*, October 24, 2019, <https://t24.com.tr/haber/diyanet-in-2020-butcesi-sekiz-bakanligi-geride-birakti-butcenin-125-milyon-lirasi-derneklere-aktarilacak.845137>.

³⁶ Monica Marks, “Tunisia's Islamists and the “Turkish Model”,” *Journal of Democracy* 28, no. 1 (2017), 102-115.

³⁷ Adar and Yenigün, “A Muslim Counter-Hegemony?: Turkey's Soft Power Strategies and Islamophobia.”

³⁸ Nye, *The Future of Power*, 13.

³⁹ Marks, “Tunisia's Islamists and the “Turkish Model”,” 102-115.

Ennahda Party members indicate that most members of the party still view the AKP favorably and believe that international criticism of Erdoğan since 2013 has been unfair.⁴⁰

Many scholars seem to agree that the AKP and Turkish models are no longer viable for Tunisia and for other Arab states because of “deep structural problems within the Turkish political economy”;⁴¹ however, this assessment belies the continued popularity of Turkish cultural exports;⁴² Tunisians’ apparently still-favorable views of the Turkish government, at least among those surveyed by Marks;⁴³ and Turkey’s continued popularity as a tourist destination among travelers in the MENA region.⁴⁴ Moreover, Arab Barometer surveys of attitudes toward Turkey in 11 separate Arab countries between 2012 and 2019 have shown “[s]trong and (generally) growing support for Turkey,” leaving it the “most popular regional power,” with 57% of Tunisians favoring closer economic ties with Ankara.⁴⁵ This is supported by a survey of the academic literature and publicly-available information leads us to believe that the narrative of the supposed decline of Turkish influence and soft power reflects observers’ hopes for Turkey as an example for political reform in Arab states, rather than Arab attitudes toward Turkey. Moreover, as this study finds, Ankara continues to conduct significant cultural diplomacy throughout the MENA region and globally.

Religion's place in Turkish–Iranian Relations

Two branches of IR theory provide frameworks to consider what role religious outreach plays in Turkish–Iranian relations. Realism dismisses religious outreach as noise: no matter how exquisitely it is conducted, Islamic outreach cannot shift Iran on issues that matter. Tangible security threats, not their internal characteristics, cause states to align.⁴⁶ Constructivist interpretations of Turkey’s foreign policy, which see identity interests as determining behavior,

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Stefano Maria Torelli, “The “AKP Model” and Tunisia’s Al-Nahda: From Convergence to Competition?” *Insight Turkey* 14, no. 3 (2012), 65.

⁴² Guida and Göksel, *Reevaluating the Sources and Fragility of Turkey’s Soft Power After the Arab Uprisings*, 151-168.

⁴³ Marks, “Tunisia’s Islamists and the “Turkish Model”,” 102-115.

⁴⁴ Guida and Göksel, *Reevaluating the Sources and Fragility of Turkey’s Soft Power After the Arab Uprisings*, 151-168.

⁴⁵ Michael Robbins, “What Arab Publics Think: Findings from the Fifth Wave of Arab Barometer,” *Arab Barometer*, January 28, 2020, <https://www.arabbarometer.org/publication/what-arab-publics-think-findings-from-the-fifth-wave-of-arab-barometer/>.

⁴⁶ Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 5.

are divided on whether the AKP's religious character serves as a source of cooperation or conflict with Iran. Accordingly, constructivist literature gives no clear verdict on the purpose or outcome of Turkish religious outreach efforts beyond identity signaling to the AKP's domestic audience. This section offers a brief overview of how realists characterize the Turkish–Iranian relationship, a constructivist reframing of that relationship, and what the AKP's religious character means for relations with Iran.

Eschewing identity or ideational explanations for the relationship, realists situate Turkish–Iranian relations in the mutual threat they pose to each other's hegemonic aspirations. While they oscillate between conflict and cooperation on most issues, shared vulnerabilities create regular cooperation between Tehran and Ankara: containing Kurdish separatism, energy security, and confronting Sunni jihadist terrorism.⁴⁷ Post-Cold War realist scholarship examines geostrategic competition in the Caucasus and former Soviet republics in Central Asia while more recent scholarship shifts its focus to geostrategic competition in the Arab world, particularly in Syria.⁴⁸ In their most recent round of geostrategic competition, realists point to a fundamental different reading of the system incentives by Turkey and Iran to explain why Ankara pursued a regime change policy that brought it into conflict with Tehran. Ultimately, Turkey misread the power balance within Syria and was punished by the system.⁴⁹ By playing the game better, so to speak, Iran was able to gain influence across the region at the expense of Turkey.

This study requires a theory of how Iran reacts to Turkish soft power if it is to assess its impact. Constructivists examining the relationship from the Iranian side attribute conflict between Iran and Turkey in Syria not to a miscalculation by Ankara that opened it to being punished, but to a serious ideational threat felt by the leadership in Tehran that generated a massive expenditure of resources to prop up Assad's regime in the face of collapse. This acute crisis in their relationship illustrates the important factors in a relationship determined by ideas and identity rather than objective security interests. The successful regional spread of Turkey's fusion of democracy and Islam – over Iran's revolutionary ideology – threatened to revive domestic conflicts between Ayatollah Khamenei and the reformists who were suppressed

⁴⁷ Magdalena Kirchner and Şafak Baş, "Chaldiran 2.0: Conceptualizing Iranian-Turkish Relations after the Arab Spring," In *Contemporary Turkey at a Glance II: Turkey Transformed? Power, History, Culture*, edited by Meltem Ersoy and Esra Ozyurek (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2017), 163, [doi:10.1007/978-3-658-16021-0](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-16021-0).

⁴⁸ Ufuk Ulutaş and Burhanettin Duran, "Traditional Rivalry or Regional Design in the Middle East?" *Insight Turkey* 20, no. 2 (2018): 81-106, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26390309>.

⁴⁹ Elik, "The Arab Spring and Turkish-Iranian Relations, 2011-2016," 108-109.

following the 2009 Green Movement. Because of the similarities between the AKP's moderate Islamic politics and the Iranian reformists "civil Islam" Iran's conservatives viewed the AKP as an ideological threat that needed to be discredited for their own political survival. Tensions in the bilateral relationship only subsided after the AKP's model of political Islam lost its regional appeal.⁵⁰

Constructivists analyzing Turkey's foreign policy under the AKP acknowledge that religious identity affects foreign policy but are divided on how the AKP's identity goals manifest vis-à-vis Iran. In a more expansive reading of the AKP's identity project, enacting policies that demonstrate cooperation and solidarity with Iran advance the AKP's identity goals.⁵¹ On the other hand, a reading of Turkey's foreign policy interests that more narrowly reflects the AKP's drive towards Sunni majoritarianism within Turkey sees the AKP's identity conflict with Alevis as drawing Turkey into conflict with Iran by inviting the wider regional sectarian schism into Turkey.⁵² The disparity between these explanations indicate that a more nuanced understanding of Turkish religious diplomacy towards Iran under the AKP is necessary.

Implications for this study: filling a gap in the existing literature

The existing academic literature attributes various causes (domestic political calculus, economic and geopolitical interests, ideological motivations, or all three) and effects to Turkish soft power efforts globally; however, these efforts have not been researched significantly, if at all, within the MENA region. We believe that the gaps in the literature concerning Turkey's Islamic outreach in the Arab world and its Islamic diplomacy with Iran present an opportunity for scholarly research. This is especially the case in Tunisia, where a confluence of factors - the Ennahda party's similarity to the AKP in many respects; Tunisia's geographical and discursive distance from issues related to the civil war in Syria and from Turkey's foreign policy ambitions in the Levant; and Tunisia's transition toward democracy make it an excellent case study of the breadth and impact of Turkish cultural diplomacy.

⁵⁰ Mohammad Ayatollahi Tabaar, *Religious Statecraft: The Politics of Islam in Iran* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 267-271.

⁵¹ Hintz, *Identity Politics Inside Out*, 111-112.

⁵² Ceren Lord, *Religious Politics in Turkey: from the Birth of the Republic to the AKP* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 158.

Study Design – Paired Case Media Survey

The ongoing COVID-19 global pandemic has prevented us from conducting in-person field research and interviews with officials in both Turkey and Tunisia; therefore, we have shifted the focus of our study to the following arenas 1) An analysis of Turkish, Tunisian, and Iranian news media and other publicly-available sources of information (primarily the online publications of Turkish governmental ministries); 2) Social media analysis; and 3) Remote consultations with academic experts. The purpose of our remote consultations is to fill in the gaps in the publicly-available information (i.e., to help explain why Ankara does not appear to pursue religious diplomacy in the MENA region to the extent that it does elsewhere) and to provide greater context as to how its soft power efforts support its foreign policy goals in the region.

Case selection

The two cases of this study, deliberately chosen for their extreme difference from each other, provide a reasonable basis for exploring Turkey's policy of Islamic outreach in the MENA region without surveying every country. This research hypothesizes that Turkey employs its cultural diplomacy and aid organizations in a coordinated effort to influence public opinion as well as intergovernmental relations. Accordingly, religious diplomacy is but one aspect of its larger soft power strategy. The discourse employed by Turkish Islamists, which bases Turkey's claim to regional leadership in historic and cultural exceptionalism guided by religious values, is flexible as to who are appropriate partners for Turkey; they need not be restricted to former Ottoman territories or even the Sunni Muslim world.⁵³ By virtue of this flexibility, Turkey could theoretically pursue a policy of religious diplomacy that simultaneously takes full advantage of similarities with Tunisia while making broad appeals to Iran.

Accepting such a hypothesis, however, attributes intention to a behavior that may not actually exist. Rather than the logic of consequences already described, Turkey's Islamic outreach could be motivated by a logic of appropriateness, that is, by Turkish Islamists striving "to realize in practice the goals envisioned by their identity."⁵⁴ Engaging in religious diplomacy may be part of how Turkish Islamists communicate their values and legitimacy to a domestic

⁵³ Lisel Hintz, conversation with the authors, December 5, 2019.

⁵⁴ Hintz, *Identity Politics Inside Out*, 19.

audience. In such a scenario, since the true audience of Turkey's religious diplomacy remains constant, we may reasonably expect the content of such diplomacy to remain likewise constant and vary little, even between such extremely different cases as Iran and Tunisia.

By conducting a comparative study using paired cases, this project benefits from the "intimacy of analysis" that large N studies lack while allowing for the comparison of a single variable across cases.⁵⁵ Furthermore, pairing two very different cases that share a similar outcome in a *most-different systems analysis* may assist in identifying a common factor that explains the outcome because many possible explanations are different between the cases.⁵⁶ In this case, the similar outcome is some level of Turkish religious diplomatic engagement. A most different systems analysis allows this project to avoid *accidental* similarities caused by two cases sharing attributes. That is, if Turkish Islamic outreach does in fact vary between states as part of an opportunistic soft power strategy, but this study focuses on two cases whose similarities cause Turkey to approach them similarly, it may incorrectly conclude that Turkey's religious diplomacy varies little and thus is likely to be caused by domestic consideration. To put this another way, if any variation in Turkish religious diplomacy *does* exist in the MENA region, it *should* exist between Iran and Tunisia.

As paired cases, Iran and Tunisia could hardly be more different. Iran is overwhelmingly Jafari Shi'a while Tunisia is almost entirely Maliki Sunni. Iran and Turkey share a border and have long-standing economic, energy, and security ties. Tunisia was ruled directly by the Ottoman Empire and experienced colonization by the French before gaining independence; however, since the formation of the Turkish Republic, North Africa has only recently reemerged as a region of interest for policymakers in Ankara. Tunisia underwent a popular revolution that led to democracy while Iran's authoritarians continually suppress popular protest. Turkey and Tunisia share a history of secularism while Iran's Islamic Republic explicitly rejects secularism. Of particular note for this study, although both countries have vibrant media, Iran and Tunisia exist in separate media environments.

The benefits of this study design should not be overstated, however. The difference between the cases gives leverage as part of an explanation for the overall character of Turkish

⁵⁵ Sidney Tarrow, "The Strategy of Paired Comparison: Toward a Theory of Practice," *Comparative Political Studies* 43, no. 2 (2010): 244. [doi:10.1177/0010414009350044](https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414009350044).

⁵⁶ John Gerring and Lee Cojocaru, "Selecting Cases for Intensive Analysis," *Sociological Methods & Research* 45, no. 3 (2016): 400. [doi:10.1177/0049124116631692](https://doi.org/10.1177/0049124116631692).

Islamic outreach in the MENA region, but the study design gives no leverage to explain any variation in outreach efforts should they be observed.

Methodology

As a paired case study that explores Turkey's soft power strategy in the MENA region, this research requires data that can support analyses as to whether these efforts have had any effect in the target countries. This research project gathers data for analysis from interviews with experts, social media analysis, as well as the analysis of news media and other publicly available information. As discussed earlier, paired case studies combine the intimacy of analysis that is typically only found in studies focusing on a single case with the ability to leverage the type of pairing to gain insight into some aspect shared by both cases.⁵⁷ This study proposes using media and social media analysis to develop an understanding of the activities and content of Turkish religious diplomacy in Tunisia and Iran. Furthermore, the social media and media data collected for each country can be analyzed to gauge the relevance of Turkish religious diplomacy to both public and elite opinion towards Turkey.

This study seeks to explain both the character and effectiveness of Turkey's Islamic outreach. Through its parallel approach, this study aims to better identify what avenues of religious engagement Turkey prioritizes or neglects in each case, as opposed to which efforts succeed or fail because of audience receptivity. By picking cases as different as Tunisia and Iran, a *most-different systems* approach should clarify if Turkey individually crafts a strategy for each country in the MENA region or if it takes generally the same approach to them all. While this study bases its findings on publicly available information, expert consultations provide context for that information, particularly concerning the goals of Turkey's outreach efforts.⁵⁸ Furthermore, consultations with subject matter experts ensure that this study conducts a thorough survey of Turkish religious diplomacy in Tunisia and Iran.

Because we are unable to interview Iranian regime elites about their perceptions of Turkish religious diplomacy, we must look for evidence of elite attitudes in regime-aligned

⁵⁷ Gerring and Cojocaru, "Selecting Cases for Intensive Analysis," 393.

⁵⁸ This is done in part to address this study's lack of in-country research. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, travel to Turkey for research for this study was not possible.

media sources. Iran lacks political parties and therefore a great deal of contestation and political messaging shifts into the news media. Political factions support news outlets, which in turn offer interpretations of events in line with their faction's interests.⁵⁹ We chose the newspaper *Kayhan* as our primary Iranian source for a media survey because it represents the opinions of the conservative religious elite who are likely to be most attuned to religious diplomacy. *Kayhan* is close to the office of the supreme jurist and is a mouthpiece for Iran's conservative clerical elite.⁶⁰ Should Turkish religious diplomacy have an effect on the opinions of Iran's political elite, we can reasonably expect to observe its effect in the pages of *Kayhan*.

We compiled a database of every Persian language article in *Kayhan* that mentions Turkey since December 26, 2019, when the Diyanet hosted a large bilateral religious conference in Ankara between Turkish and Iranian ulema. Based on the tone of language used to describe Turkey, we evaluated the articles as either positive, neutral, or antagonistic. Positive articles portray Turkey as a friend to Iran. Such articles may emphasize Iran and Turkey working at a common purpose, such as when they jointly condemned violence against Muslims in India.⁶¹ Neutral articles either refer to Turkey in passing or describe Turkish action in plain language that simply relays information. Antagonistic articles either revel in Turkish misfortunes or makes salacious claims about Turkish behavior. For example, *Kayhan*'s writers frequently makes claims of Turkish support for terrorists in Syria.⁶² Reporting on and describing Turkish military operations does not necessarily give an article an antagonistic tone. For instance, *Kayhan* described Turkish airstrikes against Kurdish militant bases in northern Iraq using plain, neutral language.⁶³

The political and media environment in Tunisia is drastically different from Iran's, so there is not a Tunisian parallel to the Iranian *Kayhan* that is so closely linked to the country's political and religious elite. Therefore, a news media analysis likely would not provide us with insight into elite opinion regarding Turkish religious diplomacy (for this, we had originally

⁵⁹ Tabaar, *Religious Statecraft*, 227-228.

⁶⁰ Tabaar, *Religious Statecraft*, 245.

⁶¹ "Tazaahoraat-e gastrade-ye mardom-e banglaadesh 'aley-he koshtaar-e mosalmaanaan dar hind," (Widespread protests by the people of Bangladesh against the killing of Muslims in India), *Kayhan*, March 8, 2020.

⁶² "Edgham-e kaamel-e niroohaa-ye torkiye baa terooristha," (The complete merger of Turkish forces with terrorists in Idlib, Syria), *Kayhan*, March 4, 2020.

⁶³ "Aaghaz-e raayzani-ye jaryaanhaa-ye siyasi-ye 'eraaq baraaye entekhaab-e nokhost vazir-e jadid," (Iraqi political factions begin to choose a new prime minister), *Kayhan*, March 4, 2020.

planned to rely on interviews with officials in Tunisia); however, we conducted an analysis of Tunisian reporting of engagement between both countries to better understand both elite and public opinion of Turkey. For example, as will be discussed below, the Tunisian press reported on a controversial visit by Turkish President Erdoğan to Tunis in December 2019. Separately, social media analysis is perhaps the best means available to us for gauging Tunisian public opinion toward Ankara's soft power efforts without traveling to the country. In addition to surveying the social media engagement by Tunisians concerning events like those discussed above, we are also reviewing their engagement with the social media pages of Turkish institutions. The Diyanet has several Facebook and Twitter pages that do not appear to receive much engagement by Tunisians (or Arabs in general); however, other Turkish cultural diplomacy organizations have relatively popular social media presences for their branches in Tunis.

Study Findings – Assessing Turkish Islamic Outreach in the MENA Region

Turkish Soft Power in the MENA Region

Based solely on the publicly available news media, social media, and government publications, the specifically religious component of Turkish cultural diplomacy in the MENA region is not nearly as prominent as Ankara's efforts in Europe, North America, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Central Asia. In the MENA region, Ankara's religious diplomacy takes place primarily through multilateral conferences, scholarships for academic study or religious training in Turkey, and via the humanitarian and development activities of organizations like TİKA and the Turkish Red Crescent (Türk Kızılay). In contrast, Diyanet and Turkish Diyanet Foundation cultural centers, mosques, schools and other initiatives are the most visible aspect of Turkish soft power efforts in Europe, the Americas, and elsewhere. While the TDV has conducted hundreds of mosque construction and renovation projects around the world, within the MENA space only Gaza, Syria,⁶⁴ Somalia, and Sudan have hosted such projects.⁶⁵ Although the lack of Diyanet activity makes sense in the case of states with which Ankara has fraught bilateral relations (like Egypt and Iran) and which would be suspicious of any perceived attempt to export "Turkish Islam,"

⁶⁴Khaled al-Khateb, "Turkish Foundation Helps Syrians Recover from Devastation of War," *Al-Monitor*, August 23, 2017, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/08/syria-operation-euphrates-shield-aleppo-turkey-mosques.html>.

⁶⁵ *Yurt Dışı Camiler*, (International Mosques), Turkish Diyanet Foundation, <https://tdv.org/tr-TR/faaliyetlerimiz/camiler/>.

without asking Turkish officials directly it is difficult to fully explain the apparently small scope of religious diplomacy in permissive (and arguably receptive) contexts like in Tunisia. However, we are able to make some assessments based on the information available to us. Before then, it is useful to explore what the Turkish soft power apparatus looks like in both of our cases, and how Ankara conducts cultural diplomacy in Tunisia and Iran.

Turkish Cultural Diplomacy and Islamic Outreach in Tunisia – A Holistic Strategy with a Limited Religious Component

The global network of Turkish state institutions and NGOs that conduct cultural diplomacy is organized differently in every state, and this also applies to Tunisia. As is the case throughout the MENA region, the Turkish soft power apparatus in Tunisia appears to favor the more secular aspects of its cultural diplomacy rather than Islamic outreach. TİKA, the Yunus Emre Institute, and the Turkish Maarif Foundation (TMF) all have physical presences in Tunis as well as Tunisia-specific social media pages on Facebook that receive a notable level of engagement by Tunisians. Of the three, the TMF (under the name of “International Maarif Schools of Tunisia”) receives the most, with approximately 8,700 followers; followed by the Yunus Emre Institute with approximately 5,000 followers. TİKA’s Tunisia-specific page has over 2,500 followers; however, there is also a non-country specific TİKA Arabic page that may also receive engagement from Tunisians. It is important to note that none of these institutions has a religious mandate with the possible exception of the TMF, which is “an umbrella organization created by the Turkish government in June 2016 ostensibly to oversee Turkish Islamic education abroad,” and was reportedly created to combat the influence of, and replace schools operated by, Fethullah Gülen’s Hizmet Movement.⁶⁶ The TMF’s stated mission is to “carry out comprehensive educational activities throughout the world based on the common values of humanity and Anatolian tradition of wisdom,”⁶⁷ but Maarif schools include secular topics as well as religious education in their curricula.

⁶⁶ Stéphanie Fillion, “A Battle for Power in Turkey Faces Resistance in Senegal,” *Quartz*, December 6, 2017, <https://qz.com/africa/1147965/a-battle-for-power-in-turkey-faces-resistance-in-senegal/>.

⁶⁷ *Turkish Maarif Foundation*, Turkish Maarif Foundation, <https://nj.maarifschool.org/page/524-turkish-maarif-foundation-12>.

Contrast this with the United States, where Islamic outreach is the main effort in Turkish soft power efforts. Like Tunisia, the U.S. hosts a Yunus Emre Institute and four Maarif Foundation Schools;⁶⁸ however, the Diyanet also has an extensive and very public presence throughout the country. The Diyanet Center of America (DCA) – located just outside of Washington, D.C. and which was inaugurated in 2016 during a ceremony that was personally attended by Erdoğan – is reportedly “the largest Islamic campus ‘in the Western Hemisphere.’”⁶⁹ In addition, according to the DCA’s website, the Diyanet operates 26 other mosques throughout the country.⁷⁰ Moreover, while an Office of the Counselor for Religious Services is listed on the websites of the Turkish embassies in Washington, Paris, London, and Berlin, this office is not listed for the Turkish embassy in Tunis.

However, our research indicates that the Diyanet does conduct limited activities with and in Tunisia. This mainly takes the form of bilateral visits – for example the President of the Diyanet Ali Erbaş’s February 2019 meeting with the Mufti of Tunisia, Othman Battih⁷¹ – and multinational conferences like the 2017 International Congress of Islamic Societies, which was held in Istanbul and attended by a representative by Tunisia.⁷² While the Diyanet itself plays a much smaller role in Tunisia (and in the MENA region generally) than it does elsewhere, to a certain extent other elements of the Turkish soft power apparatus conduct religious diplomacy themselves and/or promote Diyanet initiatives. For example, TİKA,⁷³ the Yunus Emre Institute,⁷⁴ and the Turkish Embassy in Tunis⁷⁵ have all shared information concerning Diyanet-issued scholarships and grants for foreign high school and university students to study Islam at

⁶⁸ *TMF in the World*, Turkish Maarif Foundation, <https://nj.maarifschool.org/page/42-maarif-in-the-world-16>.

⁶⁹ Hamil Harris, “Turkey’s President Comes to Maryland to Celebrate Turkish Center’s Opening,” *The Washington Post*, April 2, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/turkeys-president-comes-to-maryland-to-celebrate-turkish-centers-opening/2016/04/02/0ef8112a-f905-11e5-9804-537defcc3cf6_story.html.

⁷⁰ Mosques, Diyanet Center of America, <https://diyanetamerica.org/mosques/>.

⁷¹ “أنقرة.. رئيس الشؤون الدينية التركي يلتقي مفتي تونس”، *الدول العربية/أنقرة-رئيس الشؤون الدينية-الدينية*, February 20, 2019, <https://www.aa.com.tr/ar/الدول-العربية/أنقرة-رئيس-الشؤون-الدينية-الدينية-التركي-يلتقي-مفتي-تونس/1398292>.

⁷² Şahin Demir, “*congare beyn ol-melali javāme’ eslāmi dar istānbol bargozār shod*,” (International Islamic conference held in Istanbul), *Anadolu News Agency*, November 14, 2017, <https://www.aa.com.tr/fa/ترکیه-کنگره-بین-المللی-جوامع-اسلامی-در-استانبول-برگزارشد/965200>.

⁷³ *Post to Facebook*, TİKA Tunis, February 18, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/TIKATunis/posts/798746047270032>.

⁷⁴ *Post to Facebook*, Tunus Yunus Emre Enstitüsü, February 4, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/yeetunus/posts/489997554863110>.

⁷⁵ *Post to Facebook*, T.C. Tunus Büyükelçiliği, February 24, 2018, https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=2076581969048990&id=312185992155272.

Turkish institutions. The Tunisia Facebook pages for the TMF,⁷⁶ Yunus Emre Institute,⁷⁷ TİKA,⁷⁸ and the Turkish Embassy⁷⁹ all stress the shared Islamic values and culture between Turkey and Tunisia to some extent, for example by commemorating Islamic holidays⁸⁰ or invoking the example of the Prophet Muhammad.⁸¹ The MFA also appears to conduct public diplomacy concerning regional political issues that have a certain resonance for Muslims, which is reflected in a post by the Turkish Embassy announcing that Ankara rejects the Trump administration's Israel-Palestine peace plan.⁸² Meanwhile, posts of a religious nature are largely absent from the Facebook page of the Yunus Emre Institute and the Turkish Embassy in Washington, D.C., and do not appear as frequently in the TMF's USA page (TİKA does not have a presence in the United States).

This indicates that in the case of Muslim-majority cultures, Islamic outreach is integrated into Ankara's broader cultural and public diplomacy efforts, which is understandable – Turkey has a shared Islamic heritage with most of the region that would not be relevant in non-Muslim contexts. In the United States and Western Europe, although Turkey's religious diplomacy is much more extensive, it is targeted specifically toward Muslim and Turkish minorities. In a sense then, in non-Muslim contexts Turkey's secular cultural diplomacy and Islamic outreach are bifurcated, while in Tunisia and elsewhere in the Muslim world they form a natural extension of Turkey's attempts to build popular affinity.

⁷⁶ *Post to Facebook*, The Maarif Schools of Tunisia, April 7, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/maarifTN/photos/a.1414562038650578/2528048353968602/?type=3&theater>.

⁷⁷ *Post to Facebook*, Tunus Yunus Emre Enstitüsü, August 11, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/yeetunus/posts/595303017665896>.

⁷⁸ *Post to Facebook*, TİKA Tunis, August 11, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/TIKATunis/posts/652735811871057>.

⁷⁹ *Post to Facebook*, T.C. Tunus Büyükelçiliği, August 11, 2019, https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=3174256142614895&id=312185992155272.

⁸⁰ *Post to Facebook*, The Maarif Schools of Tunisia, November 5, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/maarifTN/posts/2236311103142330>.

⁸¹ *Post to Facebook*, The Maarif Schools of Tunisia, February 19, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/maarifTN/posts/2432670096839762>.

⁸² *Post to Facebook*, T.C. Tunus Büyükelçiliği, January 28, 2020, https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=3707050836002087&id=312185992155272.

Maintaining a Friendly Distance in Tunisia

It is nevertheless surprising that the Diyanet has not attempted to make inroads in Tunisia, considering that a 2017 Pew Research Center poll found that Erdoğan was by far the most popular regional leader among Tunisians, with an approval rating of 59%,⁸³ and that according to Huseyin Ceyhun's analysis of Arab Barometer surveys, "Tunisians' support for stronger relations with Turkey has remained stable and ... Turkey [has] remained among the most favorable regional actors among Tunisians."⁸⁴ To a certain extent, mundane and legal considerations likely explain the lack of Diyanet projects in Tunisia – under Turkish law, the Diyanet cannot conduct activities without the invitation and consent of the host government.⁸⁵ Another potential roadblock is linguistic and logistical - it should be noted that in most Diyanet mosques and cultural centers located outside of Turkey, Turkish imams actually perform religious services.⁸⁶ Considering that as of 2012 only a "handful" of Turkish diplomats possessed Arabic language skills,⁸⁷ there are likely few Diyanet imams who are able to deliver services in Arabic (supposing that they would be allowed to do so). Moreover, one of the primary purposes of Diyanet projects overseas is to provide religious services to Muslims in places where they are not available.⁸⁸ Tunisia, although it is overwhelmingly Sunni (and perhaps, by extension, more receptive to outreach by Sunni Turkey), also has its own longstanding Islamic traditions, its own mosques, and its own Ministry of Religious Affairs; therefore, there likely is not much of a direct role for the Diyanet to play in the country. Worse, a Diyanet initiative could conceivably arouse suspicion and set back the very soft power goals that it would seek to advance.

In short, there are several possible impediments to Islamic outreach by the Diyanet in Tunisia that may prevent it from carrying out the sort of activities that have received so much international attention elsewhere. Ahmet Erdi Öztürk argues that Turkish policymakers have realized that it would not be possible to make inroads in Islamic countries through religion, and

⁸³ Pew Research Center, "Mostly negative views of Middle Eastern leaders," December 8, 2017, https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2017/12/11/key-middle-east-publics-see-russia-turkey-and-u-s-all-playing-larger-roles-in-region/pg_2017-12-11_middle-east_01/.

⁸⁴ Huseyin Emre Ceyhun, "Turkey in the Middle East" [Working Paper]. *Arab Barometer* (August 7, 2018), 9, <https://www.arabbarometer.org/publication/turkey-in-the-middle-east/>.

⁸⁵ Ahmet Erdi Öztürk, conversation with the authors, March 26, 2020.

⁸⁶ Ahmet Erdi Öztürk, conversation with the authors, March 26, 2020.

⁸⁷ Çağaptay, *Erdoğan's Empire*, 193.

⁸⁸ Ahmet Erdi Öztürk, conversation with the authors, March 26, 2020.

so have focused on humanitarian efforts and scholarships to bring Muslim students to Turkish institutions, who will later hopefully serve as “cultural ambassadors” for Turkey.⁸⁹

Turkey's religious diplomacy towards Iran, deliberately transcending sectarianism

Because many of Turkey's soft power organizations are absent from Iran, its cultural and religious outreach efforts take on a particular form that reflects the tools available to Turkey. Diyanet officials are present, but only in elite-level meetings and conferences. As in most MENA states, the Diyanet does not have an organizational presence in Iran, though this is because the Diyanet primarily operates in such a capacity on the invitation of states that lack the means or ability to provide religious services. Of Turkey's other soft power organizations directly under government control,⁹⁰ only the Yunus Emre Institute maintains a presence in Iran. However, in fundamental ways the character of Turkey's soft power strategy towards Iran mirrors the strategy it pursues elsewhere in the region.

Despite the oft-repeated refrain that Iran and Turkey, as sectarian rivals for influence in the greater Middle East, are locked in reenacting a modern version of the competition⁹¹ between the Ottomans and the Safavids,⁹² their religious relationship is in fact grounded in far more recent developments. Diyanet officials have regular contact with their Iranian counterparts and their engagement focuses on contemporary issues of mutual concern such as supporting the Palestinians, confronting Islamophobia outside of the region, overcoming sectarianism within the region, and upholding traditional Islamic values. Turkey and Iran regularly participate together in multilateral religious conferences as well as engage in bilateral religious events. Far from casting Shi'a Iran as a suspicious and wholly foreign “other,” rhetoric of brotherly cooperation and commonality pervade Turkey's religious outreach to Iran.

For its outreach efforts, the Diyanet and other Turkish cultural outreach organizations have receptive institutional interlocutors in Iran, the *sāzmān-e farhang va ertebātāt-e eslāmi*, or Islamic Culture and Relations Organization (ICRO) and the *majma'-e jahāni-ye taqarib-e*

⁸⁹ Ahmet Erdi Öztürk, conversation with the authors, March 26, 2020.

⁹⁰ Ahmet Erdi Öztürk, conversation with authors, March 26, 2020. (Turkey's government-directed soft power strategy is conducted through the coordinated activities of Diyanet, Diyanet Vaqf, TİKA, Yunus Emre Institute, and the Turkish Red Crescent.)

⁹¹ Çağaptay, *Erdogan's Empire*, 156-157.

⁹² Kirchner and Baş, “Chaldiran 2.0: Conceptualizing Iranian–Turkish Relations after the Arab Spring,” 164.

mezāheb-e eslāmi-ye irān, or World Assembly for the Approximation of Islamic Religions. (Taghrib) ICRO's president previously served at the cultural attaché at Iran's embassy in Ankara and publishes in Turkish.⁹³ Founded in 1995 and tasked with conducting religious and cultural outreach, ICRO is a semi-independent governmental organization which is not directly supervised by the ministry of culture and guidance but rather by a board of government notables including former cabinet ministers from various ministries. The organization's stated goals revolve around presenting Iranian culture, the accomplishments of the 1979 revolution, and Shi'a Islam positively.⁹⁴ Taghrib's mandate is narrower than that of ICRO. Since 1990, it has held an annual "Islamic Unity" conference in Tehran, the stated purpose of which is for Islamic scholars from around the world to create areas of unity and solidarity with the ultimate goal of achieving co-recognition and religious brotherhood between all sects of Islam.⁹⁵

Meetings between Turkish and Iranian religious officials consistently produce a paired message: the two countries affirm the importance of their religious commonalities and also stress the benefits of cooperation. In international forums the two countries' representatives may simply show recognition for each other's presence before jointly taking an uncontroversial position, such as when at a cross-faith summit of religious leaders in Baku, Azerbaijan,⁹⁶ Ali Erbaş, the president of the Diyanet and Abuzar Ibrahim Turkman, president of ICRO, sat beside each other and joined in a resolution condemning Islamophobia.⁹⁷ In bilateral encounters, as might be expected, the message of cooperation becomes more prominent. Dr. Erbaş's meetings on the sidelines of Taghrib's 2018 conference in Tehran with Iran's director for Hajj and pilgrimage affairs exemplifies this pattern. At the meeting Dr. Erbaş reiterated the history of cooperation between Iran and Turkey around organizing pilgrimage, offered that each country's performances of Hajj would improve should they work together on the issue more, and stressed

⁹³ "Āshenāi bā sāzmān," (Getting to know the organization), *ICRO*, <http://www.icro.ir/index.aspx?fkeyid=&siteid=261&pageid=32272>.

⁹⁴ "Āshenāi bā sāzmān-e farhang va ertebāt-e eslāmi," (Getting to know the Organization of Islamic Culture and Communications), *Hamshahri Online*, <https://hamshahrionline.ir/xGZ7>.

⁹⁵ "Darbāre-ye konferāns," (About the conference), *Taghrib*, <http://iuc.taghrib.com/index.php?lang=fa>.

⁹⁶ "Azerbaijan hosts second summit of world religious leaders in Baku," *TRT World*, November 16, 2019, <https://www.trtworld.com/life/azerbaijan-hosts-second-summit-of-world-religious-leaders-in-baku-31423>.

⁹⁷ "The President of Religious Affairs Erbaş attends Baku Summit of World Religious Leaders," *Diyanet*, November 18, 2019, <https://www.diyanet.gov.tr/en-us/Content/PrintDetail/26108>.

that should Turkey and Iran do so, “the Hajj would be a place for peace and unity.”⁹⁸ Turkey’s message of cooperation extended beyond purely religious affairs. Patient and determined effort by Iran and Turkey to transcend sectarian disagreements had the power to right wrongs throughout the Islamic world and, as Dr. Erbaş claimed, caused worry and consternation among imperialist powers whose goals were advanced by keeping Muslims divided.⁹⁹

The Diyanet’s rhetoric of global Muslim unity and cooperation is not unique to Iran, nor is the way in which Turkey conducts secular cultural diplomacy in Iran. A branch of the Yunus Emre Institute, the public foundation for the promotion of Turkish language, culture and art, operates in Tehran. Unlike its counterpart in Tunisia, it receives almost no engagement from Iranians on social media, though its messaging strategy is quite similar. The organization’s messages fall into three categories: they promote weekly cultural events in side-by-side Persian and English,¹⁰⁰ promote Turkish language study and education opportunities in Turkey,¹⁰¹ also in side-by-side Persian and English, and finally, reposting holiday messages with Persian translation from its parent organization’s account, including religious holiday messages.¹⁰²

Assessing the Impact of Turkish Cultural Diplomacy in Tunisia

Since 2011 Tunisians have enjoyed greater freedom of expression than at any point in their history, and despite concerns about a lack of transparency regarding the funding and ownership of Tunisian media companies, Reporters without Borders ranked Tunisia the highest out of all countries in the MENA region, including Israel, in its 2019 World Press Freedom Index.¹⁰³ The Tunisian government has come under criticism for continuing to extend a state of emergency that was first declared following a terrorist attack in 2015, “[giving] the Minister of

⁹⁸ “*Didārhā-ye rayis-e sāzmān-e amur-e dini-ye torkieh dar irān*,” (President of Diyanet’s meetings in Iran), *Anadolu News Agency*, December 1, 2018. (translation by the authors)

⁹⁹ “*Safar-e rayis-e sāzmān-e amur-e dini-ye torkieh be irān*,” (Diyanet president’s travel to Iran), *Anadolu News Agency*, December 1, 2018.

¹⁰⁰ For example, Yunus Emre Institute, Tehran held a recitation of Rumi’s poetry on December 17, 2019, <https://twitter.com/yeetahran/status/1206978810803081216>.

¹⁰¹ @yeetahran’s promotion of a Turkish university fair, <https://twitter.com/yeetahran/status/1123859687223566340> and promotion of language classes held at the institute <https://twitter.com/yeetahran/status/1145316311389691906>.

¹⁰² For example, retweet with translation of the main Yunus Emre Institute’s Mother’s Day message, <https://twitter.com/yeetahran/status/1127478201800851457> Of note, the Yunus Emre Institute’s Tehran branch appears to only repost holiday messages from Turkey and does not put out congratulatory messages for Iranian national holidays such as Nowruz, the Persian New Year.

¹⁰³ 2019 World Press Freedom Index, Reporters without Borders, <https://rsf.org/en/ranking>.

the Interior exceptional powers ... including monitoring the press, publications, radio broadcasts, movies and theatrical performances.”¹⁰⁴ Regardless, Tunisian political debate is lively and this is certainly the case in discussions of Turkey, which has a complicated history with Tunisia and is currently involved in a military conflict in neighboring Libya.

In order to gauge elite and public attitudes toward Turkey, this study conducts a qualitative analysis of Tunisian news media and social media sources, focusing on coverage of recent events in Tunisian-Turkish relations as well as on the social media pages of Turkish institutions with a presence in Tunisia. It surveys multiple news sources, as well as social media engagement on the Facebook pages of Tunisian news organizations and Turkish and Tunisian government offices. Of course, a limitation of the “social” component of this media review is that it is not possible to confirm the identities of individuals posting comments on Facebook; however, this method provides an opportunity to make general observations remotely and to draw conclusions from them without traveling to the country.

Tunisian social media engagement indicates that attitudes toward Turkey are divided and are likely influenced by partisan politics. Posts to Ennahda's Facebook page concerning Turkey or bilateral visits between Erdoğan and Tunisian officials, especially those involving Speaker of Parliament and party leader Rached Ghannouchi, typically (but not uniformly) receive positive commentary, for example, on a statement that Ennahda posted to its Facebook page congratulating Erdoğan on his reelection as President in June 2018,¹⁰⁵ a post about Dr. Ghannouchi's attendance at Erdoğan's swearing-in ceremony in July that year,¹⁰⁶ and a post about Ghannouchi's participation in a 2019 forum hosted by Turkish public broadcaster TRT, during which he met with Erdoğan.¹⁰⁷

In contrast, the Facebook pages of secular parties (Nidaa Tounes, Tahya Tounes, Machrou3 Tounes, and Qalb Tounes) have significantly fewer posts concerning Turkey or meetings with Erdoğan and other Turkish officials, and such posts receive much less engagement

¹⁰⁴ “Extension of Emergency State all Over Tunisia for Three Months,” *Middle East Monitor*, January 31, 2020, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200131-extension-of-emergency-state-all-over-tunisia-for-three-months/>.

¹⁰⁵ *Post to Facebook*, The Tunisian Ennahda Movement, June 24, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/Nahda.Tunisia/posts/2003069199717196>.

¹⁰⁶ *Post to Facebook*, The Tunisian Ennahda Movement, July 12, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/Nahda.Tunisia/posts/2032227886801327>.

¹⁰⁷ *Post to Facebook*, The Tunisian Ennahda Movement, October 21, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/Nahda.Tunisia/posts/2824506367573471>.

than on Ennahda's page. Posts by secular parties that do deal with Turkey generally (either implicitly or explicitly) criticize Ennahda and especially Ghannouchi for their perceived close ties to Turkey that are not in the Tunisian national interest. Among these are a statement by Machrou3 Tounes Secretary General Mohsen Marzouqi that he would never meet individually with Erdoğan (which Ghannouchi and other Tunisian political leaders have done on multiple occasions);¹⁰⁸ comments by Marzouqi in which he said that Ghannouchi had "become the Turkish ambassador to Tunisia;"¹⁰⁹ and a video of Tahya Tounes leader Mustafa Ben Ahmed speaking in the Tunisian Parliament, in which he criticized Ghannouchi for a visit to Turkey during which he met with Erdoğan.¹¹⁰

The discussion of Turkey during this parliamentary meeting is indicative of the extent to which it has become a partisan issue in Tunisia. In his comments, Ben Ahmed expressed respect and admiration for Turkey's cultural heritage and desire for "economic and scientific and artistic relations and cooperation," but also criticized Ankara's foreign policy under Erdoğan and the AKP as a threat to regional stability, and said that Turkey should treat Tunisia with respect and not condescension.¹¹¹ Speaking during the same meeting and in response to criticism of his trip to Turkey, Ghannouchi stated that Ankara has supported the Tunisian revolution; that Turkish leadership shared the values of "freedom, democracy, multi-party [politics], and open elections;" and even that the Ottomans were "liberators, not colonizers" who had in fact freed Tunisia from Spanish control.¹¹²

By far the most positive social media engagement took place on the pages of Turkish institutions, where comments were overwhelmingly favorable toward Turkey. Understandably, a post by TİKA Tunis about a provision of medical equipment to assist in Tunisia's response to COVID-19 was met with gratitude¹¹³ – more surprisingly, even posts commemorating Turkish

¹⁰⁸ *Post to Facebook*, Mouvement Machrou3 Tounes, December 27, 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/Machrou3ouna/posts/1527062604079217>.

¹⁰⁹ *Post to Facebook*, Mouvement Machrou3 Tounes, January 20, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/Machrou3ouna/posts/2688395454612587>. (translation by the authors).

¹¹⁰ *Post to Facebook*, Tahya Tounes, January 15, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/tahyatounes.tn/posts/582737348951179>

¹¹¹ *Ibid.* (translation by the authors).

¹¹² *Post to Facebook*, The Tunisian Ennahda Movement, January 16, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1035327476804942>. (translation by the authors).

¹¹³ *Post to Facebook*, TİKA Tunis, April 10, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/TIKATunis/posts/835545006923469>.

national holidays like Republic Day (Cumhuriyet Bayramı)¹¹⁴ and Victory (Armed Forces) Day,¹¹⁵ received complementary comments, with some posters even expressing admiration for the period of Ottoman rule.

A recent flashpoint in the Ankara-Tunis bilateral relationship that demonstrated divided elite and public opinion vis-à-vis Turkey was a surprise visit by President Erdoğan to Tunis in December last year. While a Facebook post by the Tunisian Office of the Presidency about the visit received nearly 800 comments that were mostly supportive,¹¹⁶ reports that Tunisian President Kaïs Saïed had agreed to drop Tunisia's longstanding neutrality regarding the conflict in Libya and would join Turkey in supporting the GNA led to "cacophony" on the Tunisian political scene (a spokeswoman for the Office of the President later denied these reports).¹¹⁷ The French-language and publicly-owned *La Presse de Tunisie* reported that the visit "was perceived by multiple political parties as representing an infringement of the status of the Tunisian state and a destabilization of our diplomatic traditions," and went on to discuss secular parties' opposition to the position adopted by Ennahda that the GNA is the legitimate government in Libya because it is recognized by the UN.¹¹⁸ Machrou3 Tounes posted a statement by Marzouqi on its Facebook page in which he called for transparency about what was discussed during the visit; warned against "using Tunisia as a platform for any intelligence, security, or military efforts for Turkish interests in Libya"; and said that in order to maintain a "moderate and neutral" position toward Libya, Marshall Haftar and the Presidents of Egypt and Greece should also be invited to Tunis.¹¹⁹ Tunisian television station Elhiwar Ettounsi posted a poll to its Facebook page that asked, "Do you believe that Erdoğan's meeting with the President of the Republic will play a role in resolving the ongoing conflict in Libya?," to which 66% of

¹¹⁴ *Post to Facebook*, TİKA Tunis, July 25, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/yeetunus/posts/585808911948640>.

¹¹⁵ *Post to Facebook*, TİKA Tunis, August 30, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/TIKATunis/photos/rpp.335772343567407/663940974083874/?type=3&theater>.

¹¹⁶ *Post to Facebook*, Office of the Presidency of Tunisia, December 25, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/Presidence.tn/videos/473870900235237/>.

¹¹⁷ "Tunisie: Vive Polémique Après La Visite Du Président Turc," *Radio France Internationale*, December 26, 2019, <http://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20191226-tunisie-polemique-reactions-visite-erdogan-libye>.

¹¹⁸ M'hamed Jaïbi, "Visite d'Erdoğan en Tunisie : Les «Secrets» d'un Voyage Éclair," *La Presse de Tunisie*, December 27, 2019, <https://lapresse.tn/41590/visite-derdogan-en-tunisie-les-secrets-dun-voyage-eclair/>. (translation by the authors).

¹¹⁹ *Post to Facebook*, Mouvement Machrou3 Tounes, December 25, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/Machrou3ouna/posts/2631313650320768>. (translation by the authors).

respondents said “No.”¹²⁰ Even Ennahda official newspaper Elfejr’s Facebook posts about the visit received mixed commentary, with some saying that Tunisian territory should by no means be used for Turkish operations in Libya¹²¹ and that the visit portended future military threats to Tunisia, while others were more positive.¹²²

Coverage of the Tunis-Ankara bilateral relationship in Tunisian news, and Tunisian reactions on social media, demonstrate that elite and public opinion vis-à-vis Turkey is divided. Although attitudes toward Turkey are by no means uniformly split along partisan lines, this study of Tunisian social media engagement supports Dr. Marks’s findings that Ennahda supporters appear to have a more favorable view of Ankara and of the potential for further bilateral cooperation between Turkey and Tunisia. Meanwhile, more secular elements of Tunisian society appear to be more skeptical of Turkey’s motives and of its perceived involvement in Tunisian partisan politics. Whether this is due to ordinary Tunisians’ genuinely-held views or simply a result of signaling by political elites is difficult to determine; however, it is possible that the ongoing Turkish military campaign in neighboring Libya, especially if it leads to a further deterioration in the situation there, could cause Turkey’s image in Tunisia to decline.

These apparently divided attitudes toward Turkey may help explain Ankara’s tempered soft power approach in Tunisia. Even seemingly uncontroversial gestures of goodwill on the part of Turkey can be set back by divided domestic public opinion – for example, a post on the Facebook page of Tunisian online news site Kapitalis about a TİKA grant that would be used to build a hospital in Tunisia received commentary expressing skepticism about Ankara’s underlying motivations for providing developmental aid.¹²³ A more assertive strategy of Islamic outreach involving the kind of large Diyanet projects seen elsewhere would likely be rejected by segments of Tunisian society – for this reason, Ankara may have strategically decided to maintain a friendly distance in Tunisia.

¹²⁰ *Post to Facebook*, Elhiwar Ettounsi, December 25, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/EttounsiyaTV/posts/3394280717309287>. (translation by the authors).

¹²¹ *Post to Facebook*, Jaridat Elfejr, December 25, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/alfajr.nahdha/posts/3129435567071232>.

¹²² *Post to Facebook*, Jaridat Elfejr, December 25, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/alfajr.nahdha/posts/3129327707082018>.

¹²³ *Post to Facebook*, Kapitalis, January 27, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/KapitalisInfo/posts/1765275953504735>.

Iranian reception of Turkish Islamic outreach, enthusiastic silence

This study did not find evidence of positive engagement from Iranians with Turkish government-led religious diplomacy.¹²⁴ While the impact of Turkey's religious outreach on public opinion seems to be negligible, its impact on intergovernmental relations is both unexpected and revealing of ideological insecurities in the Islamic Republic.

At the end of December 2019, Iran and Turkey seemed to take concrete steps to realize Dr. Erbaş's call for Islamic unity from the previous year. The Diyanet and ICRO held a two-day bilateral conference in Ankara where religious scholars from Iran and Turkey set to work resolving disputes and finding peaceful coexistence.¹²⁵ Like much of the earlier outreach, the conference had an uncontroversial point of focus – the heads of the two organizations signed a memorandum of understanding on cooperation between Iranian and Turkish religious scholars¹²⁶ and then opened a joint exhibition in Ankara's Ahmet Hamdi Akseki Mosque of Qur'anic products such as Islamic calligraphy.¹²⁷ Persian language coverage of the event in Anadolu News Agency focused on the two states' shared interest in Palestine and their cooperation on this and other issues would find solutions to problems besetting the Islamic world.¹²⁸

ICRO's response to the bilateral conference was overwhelmingly positive. Over the two-day conference in Ankara the organization published fifteen press releases detailing the speeches given by Turkish and Iranian scholars. Every press release emphasized the commonality of purpose felt by Turkey and Iran and mentioned new fields of cooperation opening up before the two nations. The unity between the ulema attending the conference was so strongly expressed

¹²⁴ The celebratory messages for religious holidays posted on the Tehran Yunus Emre Institute's Facebook and Twitter account were by and large ignored by Iranians. They only received engagement from the same handful of Turkish language accounts.

¹²⁵ "Neshast-e ruz-e aval-e andishmandān va 'olemā-ye dini-ye irān va torkieh dar sāzmān-e diyānet," (First day of meetings between Iranian and Turkish thinkers and ulema at the Diyanet), ICRO, December 27, 2019, <http://fa.ankara.icro.ir/index.aspx?siteid=147&pageid=11637&newsview=741635>.

¹²⁶ "Emzā-ye tafāhomnāmeḥ-ye hamkāri bayn sāzmān-e farhang va erbebātāt-e eslāmi va sāzmān-e diyānet-e torkieh," (Signing of memorandum of understanding and cooperation between department of Islamic culture and communication and the Turkish Diyanet), ICRO, December 26, 2019, <http://icro.ir/index.aspx?siteid=261&pageid=32423&newsview=741608>.

¹²⁷ "Namāyeshgāh-e mahsulāt-e qorāni gashāyesh yāft," (Exhibition of Quranic products opened), ICRO, December 27, 2019, <http://www.icro.ir/index.aspx?siteid=261&pageid=32256&newsview=741623>.

¹²⁸ "Tākid-e rayis-e sāzmān-e diyānet-e torkieh bar ahmiyat-e masaleh-e felestin dar didār bā heyat-e irāni," (Diyanet president's emphasis on the importance of the Palestinian issue in meeting with Iranian delegation), Anadolu News Agency, December 26, 2019.

that the Diyanet needed to release a statement a week later to counter rumors that Iranian clerics were coming to teach in Turkish theology universities!¹²⁹

Although the Ankara conference received positive coverage in mainstream Islamic Republic media outlets,¹³⁰ it received no mention in *Kayhan*, Iran's leading paper amongst the conservative clerical elite. Quite the opposite, the same week *Kayhan* published two hostile articles attacking Turkey's activities in the region. Seizing upon comments by the Turkish interior minister that Turkey was a strategic power in the region, the paper derided AK Parti officials as "hallucinatory." The article went on to criticize Turkey's intervention in Syria as a violation against Syria's lawful government and even claimed that Turkey's involvement in Libya, which usually receives neutral coverage in *Kayhan*, "adds considerably to the pain of the Libyan people."¹³¹ The second piece accused Turkey of attempting to work outside of the Astana process to seize territory in Syria.¹³²

Over the next several months, *Kayhan* articles consistently and harshly criticized Turkey in hyperbolic terms for its intervention in Syria.¹³³ The paper frequently asserts that the Turkish military collaborates with terrorists¹³⁴ – often at the sinister direction of Israel and the United States¹³⁵ – and relishing in the losses inflicted upon them by Syrian and Russian forces.¹³⁶ *Kayhan*'s editors have a particular dislike of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, portraying him as a tin-pot dictator who dreams of greatness while running his country into the ground.¹³⁷ The paper ascribes the ongoing violence in Syria to his delusional ambitions to restore

¹²⁹ "Sāzmān-e amur-e dini-ye torkieh: kārshenāsān-e irāni rā estekhdām nakarde-im," (Diyanet: we have not hired Iranian experts), *Anadolu News Agency*, December 31, 2019.

¹³⁰ "Didār-e ibrahimi turkomān bā rayis-e sāzmān-e diyānet-e torkieh," (Ibrahimi Turkoman's meeting with the president of the Diyanet), *Iranian Student News Agency*, December 28, 2019, <https://www.isna.ir/news/98100705052/>.

¹³¹ "Azhārāt-e tavahom ālud-e mardān-e erdoghān darbāre-ye qodrat-e torkieh!" (Hallucinatory remarks by Erdogan's men about Turkey's power!), *Kayhan*, December 30, 2019. (translation by authors)

¹³² "Torkieh zir-e qulash zad 'hargez az surieh khārej nakhāhim shod!'," (Turkey broke its promise, 'we will never leave Syria!'), *Kayhan*, December 29, 2019.

¹³³ Over the surveyed period 90% of articles (35 of 39) that portray Turkey negatively also mention Syria.

¹³⁴ "Edghām-e kāmēl-e niruhā-ye torkieh bā teroristhā dar edlib surieh," (The complete merger of the Turkish military and terrorists in Idlib, Syria), *Kayhan*, March 4, 2020.

¹³⁵ "Mājerājui-ye torkieh dar surieh bāzi do sar bākht," (Turkey's adventure in Syria, a game twice lost), *Kayhan*, February 19, 2020.

¹³⁶ "Kuche bāghli (goft va shenud)," (Alleyway (dialogue)), *Kayhan*, February 28, 2020. (A humor column in which one character asks, "did you hear that 34 Turkish soldiers were killed in a Russian airstrike on terrorists?" The other replies, "what were they doing in the middle of terrorists?")

¹³⁷ "Ro 'yāyi-ye erdoghān pasha va tābuthā-ye bisedā (yāddāsh-t-e ruz)," (Erdogan Pasha's Dreams and the silent coffins (note of the day)), *Kayhan*, March 1, 2020.

the Ottoman Empire¹³⁸ and personal megalomania.¹³⁹ The only instance in the entire surveyed period where *Kayhan* presented President Erdoğan in a wholly positive light was after the killing of Lt. General Soleimani when Turkey's president was briefly quoted as saying, "the assassination of a senior Iranian commander can never remain unanswered."¹⁴⁰

Table 1: Mentions of Turkey in *Kayhan* (December 26, 2019 to March 17, 2020)

Positive	<i>expressing common purpose with or compliment of Turkey</i>	9 articles	8%
Neutral	<i>passing mention or plain language</i>	58 articles	54%
Antagonistic	<i>salacious claims about Turkey, hostile tone</i>	39 articles	37%

All of the religious solidarity supposedly being achieved at the bilateral religious conference in Ankara appears not to have improved the disposition of Iran's conservative establishment towards Turkey. This is not to suggest that the attendees of the religious conference in Ankara are Iran's foreign policy makers or that there should be a clear correlation between religious diplomacy and policy outcomes, however the stark contrast between ICRO and *Kayhan*'s presentation of the Iran-Turkey relationship begs the question, what is actually being accomplished through religious diplomacy? Turkish-Iranian religious engagement may simply provide a forum for Iran and Turkey to say positive things about each other in order to serve as a buffer in their relationship. In this respect, the cooperative and non-sectarian rhetoric that characterizes Turkey's religious diplomacy with Iran is reflective of the AKP's general foreign policy towards the Islamic Republic. "Islamist modernist," or "Islamist reformist," elements within Turkey's Islamist movement seek to minimize sectarian differences in Turkey's relations with Iran in order to emphasize the unity of the umma against alleged western imperialist intervention.¹⁴¹ Additionally, cross-sectarian dialogue may bolster narratives of

¹³⁸ "Lezāt-e sarneveshtsaz dar surieh va yek forsāt-e talāhiy! (yāddāsh-t-e ruz)," (Fateful moments in Syria and a golden opportunity! (note of the day)), *Kayhan*, February 15, 2020.

¹³⁹ "Qalichdārāoghlu: erdoghān 'āmel va masul-e asli bohrān-e surieh ast," (Qalichdaraoglu: Erdogan is primarily responsible for the Syrian crisis), *Kayhan*, March 11, 2020.

¹⁴⁰ "'Atvān: enteqām-e tahqir konande az āmrikā āghāz shode ast," (Atvan: humiliating revenge on America has begun), *Kayhan*, January 6, 2020. (translation by the authors)

¹⁴¹ Ceren Lord, conversation with the authors, April 29, 2020, email with the authors, May 5, 2020.

legitimacy within each country by demonstrating that, while some religious actors in the region hold extremist views, Iran and Turkey are not among them.¹⁴²

While Iran appears to have little trouble embracing messages of Islamic solidarity and brotherly cooperation with Turkey, Tehran rejects Turkey's attempts to harness narratives of religious unity and solidarity to advance its moral case for regional leadership. Following Mohammad Morsi's death in custody, two days of public funerary prayers were held in Turkey during which Erdoğan took an opportunity in his speech to advance Turkey's claim to moral leadership in the region. He called Sisi a murderer and an oppressor to whom supposedly upstanding states kowtowed. Erdoğan claimed that Sisi and those who supported his rule were cowards and in fact afraid of leaders like Morsi—and him.¹⁴³

Based on reporting in Iranian media, no officials from ICRO or the Iranian embassy participated in the funerary prayers for Morsi and no similar events were held in Iran. None of the three pieces published in *Kayhan* about the death of Mohammad Morsi that include mentions of Turkey describe the funerary prayers, though news outlets more liberal than *Kayhan* reported on the country-wide mourning ceremonies.¹⁴⁴ One briefly notes that Erdoğan expresses his condolences and called Morsi a martyr.¹⁴⁵ A second quotes Morsi's son accusing General Sisi of murdering his father while noting that Mr. Morsi lives in Turkey with other Egyptian political exiles.¹⁴⁶ In the final piece, Turkey is mentioned in a section about global reactions to Morsi's death. The paper repeats Erdoğan's twitter message of condolence before remarking that, "Turkey's president simply did not find sending Twitter messages in Turkish and Arabic to be sufficient. He quickly appeared in front of the camera on Turkish television networks and, using

¹⁴² At the December conference Iranian clergy proposed a joint committee of Turkish and Iranian ulema to decide what constituted religious extremism. "*hojaoleslām maleki khāstār-e marzbāndi-ye eslām bā tafākōrāt-e takfiri shod*," (Hojatoleslam Maliki called for the delineation of Islam from Takfiri thought), *ICRO*, December 28, 2019, <http://www.icro.ir/index.aspx?siteid=261&pageid=32256&newsview=741691>.

¹⁴³ "Funeral Prayer in absentia is established at Fatih Mosque for Morsi," *Diyanet*, June 19, 2019.

¹⁴⁴ "*Eqāme-ye namāz-e ghiabi barāye morsi dar sarāsar-e torkieh*," (Funeral prayers in absentia for Morsi throughout Turkey), *Hamshahri Online*, June 18, 2019, <https://hamshahrionline.ir/x5N9W>.

¹⁴⁵ "*Ehtemāl-e qotl-e mohamad morsi jedi ast/didebān-e haquq-e bashar: sāzmān-e melal vorud konad*," (The possibility of Mohammad Morsi's murder is serious/Human Rights Watch: the United Nations should enter), June 18, 2019.

¹⁴⁶ "*Farzand-e mohamad morsi: qātel-e pedar-e man 'abdālfatāh al-sisi ast*," (Mohammad Morsi's son: my father's murderer is Abdel Fattah El-Sisi), *Kayhan*, June 22, 2019.

the phrase 'Sisi the oppressor,' once again showed his anger at the last several years' developments in Egypt."¹⁴⁷

Tehran's rejection of Turkey's claim to moral leadership in the region is closely related to their decision not to commemorate the death of President Morsi. While Tehran initially greeted the Muslim Brotherhood's successes and Morsi's election as a validation of their revolution, by the time he was removed from office in the summer of 2013, the Islamic Republic's guardians had grown far more ambivalent towards his presidency.¹⁴⁸ By the time of his death in prison, Iran's conservatives had assigned Morsi to a demeaning role in a self-serving narrative of their own. Far from Diyanet head Ali Erbaş's depiction of Morsi as a martyr "screaming the truth before the oppressors,"¹⁴⁹ *Kayhan's* editorialists portrayed the deposed Egyptian President as a naïf who foolishly trusted Americans to have the Egyptian revolution's best interests at heart, when all along the Americans allegedly schemed to return the Egyptian military to power.¹⁵⁰ According to this narrative, Morsi's downfall was ultimately of his own doing because he did not lead Egypt down a path similar to Iran's after 1979. The incompatibility of the Iranian and Turkish Morsi narratives points towards why Tehran, for all the talk of cooperation and unity, cannot actually accept Ankara's actions as a model worth emulating, however seemingly aligned they become. Iran's guardian state remains deeply suspicious of Islamist politicians who base their legitimacy on a popular mandate. Particularly since the 2009 Green Movement, the conservatives aligned with Khamenei have viewed such politicians as presenting an implicit threat to the Islamic Republic.¹⁵¹ The Islamic Republic's ideological vulnerability acts as a heavy counterweight to any attractiveness that Turkey under the AK Party may otherwise hold for Tehran.

It is not for a lack of partner or shared interest in Islamic unity that Turkey's outreach efforts towards Iran do not appear to make tangible progress towards meeting its stated goal to "redeem the Islamic geography as a land of peace and tranquility."¹⁵² In Iran, Turkey's religious

¹⁴⁷ "'Morsi' tāze-tarin qorbāni-ye e'temād be āmrīkā," (Morsi, the most recent victim of trusting America), *Kayhan*, June 18, 2019. (translation by the authors)

¹⁴⁸ Tabaar, *Religious Statecraft*, 284.

¹⁴⁹ "Funeral Prayer in absentia is established at Fatih Mosque for Morsi," *Diyanet*, June 19, 2019.

¹⁵⁰ Mohammad Sarfi, "morsi rā dust dāshtand sisi rā bishtar (yāddāsh-t-e ruz)," (They loved Morsi, Sisi more (note of the day)), *Kayhan*, June 18, 2019.

¹⁵¹ Tabaar, *Religious Statecraft*, 247, 267.

¹⁵² "While fires are rising in the Islamic world, our struggle, concern and duas must be joint," *Diyanet*, December 29, 2019. (quote from Dr. Erbaş made in reference to the Syrian conflict)

diplomats have found a willing partner that professes the same ideals yet will not accept Ankara's attempts to coax those shared principles into policy changes. So long as the Islamic Republic's leadership holds some policies to be vital for Iranian security, such as the perpetuation of Bashar al-Assad's rule in Syria, Turkish attempts to employ soft power to change Tehran's preferences are bound to be frustrated. For this reason, one could describe the current state of Iranian-Turkish religious diplomacy as a "hard limit on soft power."

Conclusions and recommendations for further research

Turkey conducts religious outreach partly to signal identity commitment to AK Party supporters as others have shown; however, Turkish outreach appears to be equally motivated by Ankara's own conception of itself as a regional leader whose moral authority can draw the region into a harmonious and prosperous future. Although Turkish religious and cultural diplomacy efforts meet with very different receptions in Iran and Tunisia, the message of that outreach and even the approach taken by Turkey's cultural outreach organizations in both countries is not so different. Observed differences between Turkey's outreach programs in the two countries have more to do with local receptivity than with Turkey opportunistically developing novel approaches in every country where it conducts cultural diplomacy. It is as though Turkey's cultural organizations follow a particular format and their local audiences either respond or not.

Although some Tunisian religious officials attend international conferences in Turkey, Ankara does not conduct the same level of elite-to-elite Islamic outreach with Tunisia as Iran. It is possible that this only appears to be the case through a lack of reporting; however, it is also reasonable to infer that lower levels of engagement with Tunisia's religious elite indicate that such contact is of lower priority for Turkey. Turkey has many available diplomatic channels to work with Tunisia, and the two countries have a generally positive and well-functioning relationship. By contrast, Turkey has a major foreign policy disagreement with Iran over Syria that it has been unable to resolve through normal channels for nearly a decade. By investing in elite-to-elite religious diplomacy such as conferences between ulema tasked with producing a unifying message, Turkey may be creatively searching for a way around its impasse with Iran. No similar impasse exists in its relationship with Tunisia that would require creating new and unconventional diplomatic channels through religious outreach. Further research into Tunisian-

Turkish elite religious contact is necessary. As more Tunisians study the Islamic sciences at Turkish universities and become “cultural ambassadors”¹⁵³ for Turkey, it may be that elite-to-elite religious diplomacy between Turkey and Tunisia is being conducted entirely by Tunisians. Similarly, although this study found no evidence of Iranians studying the Islamic sciences in Turkish universities, given the stated interest from Iran’s clerical elite in reconciling Shi’a fiqh with Sunni schools, further research should look into educational exchanges as a possible source of Turkish soft power in Iran.

Iranian continued active religious engagement with Turkey, despite the clear mismatch between the messages of cooperation it produces and Iran’s actual foreign policy, may be a sign of a faction within the Islamic Republic’s elite remaking itself while out of power. Khomeini’s followers on the radical left, after being purged from the political arena in the mid-1980s, reinvented themselves as reformists and promoters of “Civic Islamism” by the time Khatemi was elected in 1997.¹⁵⁴ The elements of the Islamic Republic’s elite who lost authority and influence following the consolidation of power around the supreme leader’s office following the 2009 Green Movement may be undergoing a similar transformation. Should political dynamics in Iran change so that a faction opposed to Iran’s current “axis of resistance” foreign policy consensus makes a bid for domestic leadership, the clerics participating in seemingly fruitless discussions of Islamic unity with Turkey may find their ideas in vogue. As Tabaar puts it, by “supplying religious commodities”¹⁵⁵ such actors provide their factions with the intellectual tools needed to justify their preferred policies as being in keeping with the principles of the Islamic Revolution. Exploring this possibility requires an in-depth investigation of the intellectual nexus within Iran between foreign policy and religious thought as well as a closer examination of many of the actors involved.

In both Tunisia and Iran, because of their underlying political context, Turkish Islamic outreach encounters real limitations, both to making inroads with the general public and to changing elite opinion. In Tunisia, the political divide between secular parties and Ennahda predisposes Tunisians to have a particular view of Turkey, and any kind of engagement with Turkey is one of a many partisan issues in Tunisian politics. In such an environment, Turkey

¹⁵³ Ahmet Erdi Öztürk, conversation with authors, March 26, 2020.

¹⁵⁴ Tabaar, *Religious Statecraft*, 205-206.

¹⁵⁵ Tabaar, *Religious Statecraft*, 3.

cannot easily “win over” Tunisians who do not already support closer relations with Turkey. In Iran, regime elites are willing to engage with Turkey, even enthusiastically, but Iran’s foreign policy community seems entirely disconnected from the discourse of cooperation and unity prevalent in Iranian–Turkish religious diplomacy. This is unsurprising because over the last decade Iran’s regional foreign policy became the portfolio of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps to the exclusion of other groups of regime elites.¹⁵⁶

Our study indicates that despite Turkey’s aspirations to regional and global leadership as a model Muslim-majority democracy with a developed economy, its significant investments in soft power and Islamic outreach and its appeals to a shared Islamic history and culture are not a panacea to the structural obstacles that challenge its assertions of regional leadership. Rather than transcending domestic contexts, appeals to religious commonalities are constrained by them. Both the shape of Turkey's soft power efforts in individual states, as well as how they are received locally, reflect the contours of Ankara’s existing relationships. In Tunisia, apparently-divided attitudes toward Turkey have limited the ability of Turkish officials to seek a closer partnership. Moreover, this domestic divide has likely prevented Ankara from pursuing a bolder strategy of Islamic outreach that incorporates the kind of grand projects undertaken elsewhere in the MENA region and beyond. In the case of Iran, the nature of the Iranian state has prevented Turkey from conducting greater public outreach, whether specifically religious or even broader cultural diplomacy efforts. More significantly, despite the surprisingly robust religious diplomacy between Tehran and Ankara, Turkey is unable to convert its religious diplomacy into changes in Iranian regime elite attitudes towards the Syrian conflict. This finding accords with other research which concludes that Iranian foreign policy elites conceive of international affairs in heavily securitized, rather than ideational or symbolic, terms¹⁵⁷ thus inherently limiting the impact of Turkey’s Islamic outreach.

Our findings support the argument that Islamic outreach cannot simply transcend international politics and is subject to similar limitations as those faced by other foreign policy tools; however, this does not necessarily mean that Ankara’s efforts to cultivate soft power have been in vain. Considering that the politics of the region are still in flux and that many regional

¹⁵⁶ Ariane M. Tabatabai, *Iran's National Security Debate* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2019), 3.

¹⁵⁷ Ariane M. Tabatabai and Annie Tracy Samuel, “What the Iran-Iraq War Tells Us about the Future of the Iran Nuclear Deal,” *International Security* 42, no. 1 (2017): 162-163.

issues remain unresolved, concluding that Turkey failed to win over Arab publics post-2011 is almost certainly premature. The continued popularity of Turkish entertainment media among Arab audiences,¹⁵⁸ its growth as a destination for tourists from the region,¹⁵⁹ and surveys that show that Turkey and Erdoğan are generally popular among Arab publics demonstrate that Turkey retains a broad appeal in the Middle East and North Africa. Taken along with what appear to be powerful and genuine aspirations on the part of Erdoğan and the AKP for Turkey to lead the region,¹⁶⁰ Ankara's investment in a persistent and holistic soft power strategy may prove to be the best method to realize this goal.

Recommendations for further research

Because in-person research was not possible for this project, first and foremost we recommend interviews with Turkish policymakers to gauge the intentions behind Ankara's religious diplomacy. Further research should also investigate elite-level religious diplomacy between Turkey and Tunisia. We found a surprising lack of elite outreach, but it may simply be under-reported in public sources. To clarify this, we suggest interviews with Tunisian public officials and Ennahda party members. Particular attention should also be paid to religious higher education within Turkey as an avenue for soft power. It may be that elite-level religious outreach with Tunisia is occurring in Turkey's educational institutions. Additionally, while Tunisian social media posts show that relations with Turkey are a polarizing issue, we cannot be sure exactly how Tunisian society is polarized and if that matches political party affiliation. Therefore, we also suggest surveying Tunisians' attitudes toward Turkey to better illuminate how the issue divides Tunisian society. Similarly, we suggest public opinion polling of Iranian views of Turkey to determine how closely they align with elite opinion. Researchers able to interview Iranian officials should also investigate whether Turkish appeals to shared religious

¹⁵⁸ Menese Tokyay, "Arab world remains biggest market for Turkish TV series," *Arab News*, November 21, 2017, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1197036/media>. AND Fatimah Bhutto, "How Turkish TV is taking over the world," *The Guardian*, September 13, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2019/sep/13/turkish-tv-magnificent-century-dizi-taking-over-world>.

¹⁵⁹ According to tourism statistics released by Turkey's Ministry of Culture and Tourism, the number of tourists from the MENA region increased 46% between 2014 and 2019, which is more than double the 22% increase in the total number of tourists to Turkey over the same period. <https://www.ktb.gov.tr/EN-249299/yearly-bulletins.html>.

¹⁶⁰ Lisel Hintz, email to authors, April 24, 2020.

values influence their perceptions of Turkish behavior, although our research suggests that they do not.

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