CHAPTER 8:

CONCLUSIONS: TURKEY’S NEW DIASPORA AND KIN FOREIGN POLICY - LOOKING AHEAD

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With the aim of understanding Turkey/AKP politics vis-à-vis its diaspora and ‘kin’ communities, especially during the 2010s, the authors of the present report have examined historically the development and role of outside Turks in Turkish foreign policy. It is clear that despite Turkey’s almost simultaneous implementation of its new diaspora politics in all relevant countries, that policy has been altered, with resultant differing multiplier effects, for and within each country. In particular, Turkey has attempted to turn its diaspora and kin communities in various countries, especially those in the EU, into civil society organizations that can lobby on its behalf and so increase its ‘soft power’; these actions are both troubling to host states and occasionally have become a source of division amongst the diaspora and kin communities themselves.

Such divisions have been keenly felt in some countries, e.g., Bulgaria, where we examined the ways in which Turkey’s intervention in local politics not only undermined but also divided the secular Turkish party that for years had maintained a position in a coalition government while also maintaining the loyalty of other minority groups, such as Pomaks and Roma. Looking at the example of Bosnia, we learned that because of the former Yugoslavia’s membership in the Non-Aligned Movement, the Islamic institutions in that country have associated themselves with a more Egypt-centered (and Al Azhar-centered) Islam, such that Turkish Islamic institutions are not accorded the same power or respect from the Bosnian religious elite. Indeed, compared to other countries, the Diyanet is today considerably less influential in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Nevertheless, Bosnians feel a close relationship to Turkey because of their ‘historical kinship.’ Research in this report has also revealed the noteworthy factor that the amount of Turkey’s financial assistance to Bosnia is often exaggerated.
Like Bulgarian Turks, Turkish Cypriots have historically struggled with Turkey’s inconsistent and ever-changing policies; they are likewise struggling now to adapt to the latest changes in Turkish foreign policy. It is particularly interesting that the AKP has been unable to formulate a coherent policy re its Turkish migrants (a ‘diaspora’ in official Turkish discourse) who live in a country that is both ‘foreign’ and ‘kin.’ As a result of this ‘dual status’ of Turkish migrants, Turkish policy has wavered, sometimes appearing to move forward and at other times backward. With the 2009 changes in foreign policy, Turkey embraced the migrant associations, either by approaching them or opening its arms to any such associations that approached them. In this way, the number of migrant associations on the island exploded, and after a short time a migrant party was founded, which in its first election won a seat in parliament. The establishment of a migrant party, whose Turkish candidates claimed that they would fight for migrant rights, brought tensions to a head between Turkish Cypriots and mainland Turks. The fact that 30 percent of the citizen population in Cyprus’s north and 60 percent of the de jure population (including students, workers, and their families) is from Turkey has been for years at the top of Turkish Cypriots’ list of grievances.

While the results of Turkish foreign diaspora policy have varied by country, Turkish parties have also been established in numerous other European countries. For example, we see that in the Netherlands, while the Turkish DENK party had previously won two seats in parliament, it recently lost those seats when another party was formed with AKP support, causing the Turkish vote to become divided amongst the Turkish candidates. We have also seen that in Turkey’s new foreign policy the concept of kin community has been expanded to incorporate Sunnis and Muslims in Arab countries as well, particularly in Palestine. Turkey’s cultivation of relations with groups attached to the Muslim Brotherhood has backfired in countries such as Egypt, where relations since the last regime changes are almost at a standstill. Despite this, we see that Turkey’s simultaneous cultivation of Sunni collaborators and distancing from former sympathizers such as Israel have increased the country’s influence in Sunni regions.

Based on the various studies in this report one could conclude that there are two major elements marking the AKP’s diaspora and kin foreign policy: the political-Islamic element and the increasing authoritarianism that characterises the AKP government (Baser and Öztürk 2017). From this perspective, the AKP’s diaspora and kin policy has been consistent within the framework of its broader foreign policy that pursued more influence and control abroad – including through ideational means – to the end of rendering Turkey a hegemon regionally as well as beyond. At the same time, both the AKP’s religiosity and authoritarian tendencies have created frictions within diaspora and kin communities—a strong reminder that these communities cannot be seen monolithically and that their individual complexities must be understood and considered.

Looking ahead, as Turkey’s socio-political and economic circumstances remain uncertain and unstable—due to domestic polarisation, an economic crisis, foreign policy adventures, and fluid politico-ideological dynamics—the AKP’s diaspora and kin policy will also face
challenges. Given that diaspora and kin communities are sometimes like small-scale reflections of Turkish politics, Turkey’s domestic turmoil is often exported to them. Further, it seems that the more authoritarian Turkey becomes and the more the AKP government loses legitimacy domestically and internationally, ‘the more difficult it is for Ankara to effectively export hegemonic narratives and exert hegemonic power’ abroad (Constantinou and Tziarras 2018: 33), including among diaspora and kin communities. Thus, if there is no significant political change for the better in Turkey it is likely that polarisation will grow deeper among these communities and the AKP will have a harder time manipulating or instrumentalising them.

References
