

THE POLITICS OF GIVING: CHARITY, STATE, CIVIL SOCIETY AND GOVERNANCE IN CONTEMPORARY TURKEY

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Charitable giving has always been centrally important for both the political ambitions of the state and its governing structures, and the Muslim feelings of public belonging and commitment to religious duty. In Turkey, associations and vakıfs provide the technical assemblages to devise projects that go beyond the dichotomies of secular/religious, of charity/philanthropy and develop communities that transcend national boundaries. This paper highlights charitable associations and vakıfs as not only places where formal and informal mechanisms of social protection manifest themselves, but also as places where new understandings of the role of the state are fashioned. Visibility of the poor, tinged with nostalgia, becomes a way to remember the “just” and “fatherly” Ottoman Empire and an Islamic charitable heritage based on transnational religious feeling of brotherhood/sisterhood. Consequentially, charitable communities inadvertently aid and abet the neoliberal agenda of the government.

Keywords: charity, vakıfs, state, governance, civil society, Turkey

Introduction

Research continues to affirm the increasing role played by NGOs in shaping national and international policy as well as advocacy on the local

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level. NGOs are increasingly reframing the nation-state, both from below and from above, through their efforts to fulfill social functions that the state previously performed and through their ability to mobilize financial and political pressure on national politics and agendas (Cohen & Arato, 1992; Bratton, 1989; Hyuk-Rae & McNeal, 2007; Pierre, 2000). They aim to represent those people and interests they see as ill served by the structure of the neoliberal nation-state (Eldridge, 2005). The rising presence of civil society organizations such as NGOs, transnational corporations, and supra-national bodies are also seen as indicators of a declining or dying nation-state with the onset of globalization and the emergence of a “post-national order.”

Several authors frame the rising influence of civil society organizations in terms of an inherent dialectical tension between local institutions and practices, on the one hand, and globalization, on the other. Two of the most well-known articulations of this tension are that of “fundamentalism versus cosmopolitan tolerance” (Giddens, 2000) and “Jihad versus McWorld” (Barber, 1995). Within this formulation, the nation-state becomes a minor player caught between the antagonisms of the local and the global. Yet these categorizations remain crudely dualistic and thus unable to account for many important contextual factors in the dynamics of the relationship between civil society and the nation-state. In particular, such categorizations often ignore the voices and praxes of those who work at various local nexuses of civil society organizations and the state.

This paper is a study of the privatization of charitable giving in contemporary Turkey and its effects on conceptualizations of the state’s role in Turkish society. In my analysis, I specifically focus on associations and faith-based foundations or *vakıfs* engaged in projects aimed at alleviating poverty, investing in development, and providing relief to victims of natural disasters and other humanitarian crises. The paper highlights charitable associations and *vakıfs* as not only places where formal and informal mechanisms of social protection manifest themselves, but also as places where new understandings of the role of the state are fashioned. For example, many of the *vakıfs* dedicated to alleviating poverty call attention to the poor in a way that generates and leverages a certain historical nostalgia for the “just” and “fatherly” Ottoman Empire and its storied Islamic charitable heritage. This nostalgia, in turn, enhances the efficacy of different versions of the popular “neo-Ottoman” narratives designed to lend historical, moral, and ethno-national legitimacy to certain political parties, platforms, and candidates. This underscores the importance of studying the role charitable giving plays in the broader politics of memory and influence

in the contemporary Turkish context. Accordingly, this article focuses on both the politics and varied meanings of praxes of giving in today's Turkey.

The article will first discuss the politics of civil society organizations and the concept/practice of *vakıf* in Turkey. In doing so, I rely on Max Weber's definition of politics: "politics'...means striving to share power or striving to influence the distribution of power, either among states or among groups within a state" (cited in Singer, 2018, p. 2). I offer three interrelated arguments and a concluding argument. The three arguments are:

- 1) *Charitable organizations provide robust, contradictory, yet important venues for various philanthropic agents (e.g., donors, volunteers, employers of charitable organizations, aid-recipients, etc.) as they reframe the contours of the responsibilities of both the state and the citizenry.*
- 2) *The individual subjectivities of these philanthropic agents are fashioned within this reframing process. It is through the act of volunteering time and money that individuals reimagine, reconstitute, and reaffirm their ties to their local communities, to the Turkish state, and to the Ottoman past.*
- 3) *Consequently, many charitable institutions lend themselves to cooptation by the current Turkish government and its neoliberal agenda.*

My concluding argument is that charitable associations in contemporary Turkey occupy complex and multifaceted sociopolitical spaces. People have strong and at times contradictory reasons for why they participate in and how they perceive these spaces. In turn, charitable associations are continuously negotiating their roles within the context of local and national politics and policies. They play an under-researched and yet extremely important role as both the products and shapers of the contemporary Turkish nexus of the "local versus global" dialectic referenced above.

Methodology

This research is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Istanbul and Izmir (Turkey) between 2007 and 2013. During this time, I conducted several site visits to two civil society organizations: the Deniz Feneri Aid and Solidarity Association (DFASA) and the Foundation for

Human Rights and Freedoms and Humanitarian Relief (IHH). DFASA does not openly support any political party, but it is closely aligned with the current conservative AKP government, while the Foundation for Human Rights and Freedoms and Humanitarian Relief (IHH), created as a *vakıf*, situates itself as a transnationally active human rights organization with the goal of helping Islamic groups and nations.¹

Despite the diversity of alignments, each relies heavily on charitable donations predominantly collected during Ramadan and other religious occasions such as *Eid al-Fitr*. Each advertise themselves as legitimate bodies where believers can donate their *zakat* and *sadaqa* with the guarantee that the donated money will be spent in religiously appropriate ways and for the betterment of larger society in general and the Islamic community (*umma*) in particular.² These associations and *vakıfs* use charitable donations to fund specific projects such as return-to-village projects, educational support for orphans, building of schools and homes, distributing aid in natural disasters, aid to Gaza, and the distribution of aid-in-kind and monetary aid to needy families both within Turkey and abroad.

During the fieldwork, I visited these organizations, spending time with both employers and volunteers at their sites. I also visited the homes of aid recipients. At DFASA, I participated in aid packaging and distribution as well as working at their locations where they distribute clothing to the needy. I read and catalogued the letters of the needy that were sent to DFASA and entered data into their computerized system of aid categorization and delivery. This allowed me to see the entire process of aid application and delivery firsthand. It also gave me an opportunity

¹ Although DFASA does not openly declare loyalty to any political government party and does not define itself as an Islamic organization, it had received the blessing of the AKP government and informal interviews with volunteers and employees of the organization conducted by the author suggests empathy and alliance with the AKP government. Several issues of a magazine published by the association showcase either the then prime minister and now president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, or other party officials, as supportive of DFASA and present in various organizational activities. In one such story, Erdoğan himself calls the association, noting how he was moved by the television program of DFASA (Başbakan..., 2006, p. 31). In other issues Erdoğan's wife, Emine, and various government officials were seen participating in activities sponsored by the association. Regardless, DFASA does not get any funding from the government and largely sees itself as a charitable association free of politics.

² The obligatory *zakat* is technically a subspecies of *sadaqa* (i.e., "righteous action" or "charitable giving"), which is a broader term in Islamic teaching often used to describe all obligatory and non-obligatory forms of giving. Despite this distinction, in practice many donors may not differentiate between the two, seeing all forms of charitable giving as "obligatory" for Muslims.

to meet aid recipients on site and do follow-up research and interviews later.

I chose these charitable associations due to their continual work on aid delivery in times of disasters and in times of need. Additionally, when I started my research in 2007, DSFA was one of the most well-known and respected associations with extensive intranational and international connections. Since then, it has been embroiled in a corruption scandal and lost some of its luster. However, it still works extensively in aid delivery. Another reason I chose these specific organizations was mere serendipity: they were the organizations that opened their doors to me after my initial inquiry. I would like to note that my visits to IHH were limited since then, due to time limitations and the need to do deep ethnographic work, I decided to work more with DFASA. I have also visited several smaller, municipal associations engaged in the distribution of charitable aid. These visits emerged, in part, due to the fact that some volunteers I encountered at the two primary organizations were also involved in various other charitable associations.

The Meanings and Politics of Charitable Giving

Both theoretical and practical concerns over the varied meanings and functions of “civil society” have a long tradition in Western social thought. Unsurprisingly, from the era of classical social theorists (such as Locke, de Tocqueville, Marx, Hegel) to that of contemporary scholars (Cohen & Arato, 1992; J. Alexander, 1998), social thought has conceived of the concept of “civil society” in nearly exclusively Western terms as a largely Western phenomenon. Despite problems of definition, these thinkers took for granted that individualism, political rights, property rights, and democratic institutions were among the essential ingredients for “civil society” and thus could hardly conceive of “civil society” as anything but in the context of a modern Western society comprised of freely associating, atomized individuals bound by contracts and competing in a free market economy (J. Alexander, 1998; Kamali, 1998; Seligman, 1992; Shils, 1991). Additionally, framed as bulwarks of democratization, civil society institutions were and are often hailed as counter-hegemonic, autonomous, and apolitical spheres disconnected from and resistant to state power (Kadioğlu, 2005; Ehrenberg, 1999; Dower, 1998).

In light of this distinctively Western theoretical bias, the existence of “Muslim civil society” was generally assumed to be a *de facto* impossibility. This is why evidence of a vibrant civil society in a Muslim-majority nation-state such as Turkey was looked on as an

anomaly (Gellner, 1994; Gellner, 1997). Yet research focusing on the Middle East has shown that groups and organizations with an Islam-oriented agenda have been avid participants in the democratic sphere and have developed projects and received support from national governments (Norton, 1993a, 1993b, 1996; Kazemi, 1996; Lesch, 1996, Toprak, 1996; Anjum, 2012; and others). Additionally, the individualized, “rights”-oriented approach to civil society based on freely associating citizens was noted to have little relevance or resonance in cultures where kinship and neighborhood ties play an enormous role in encouraging and supporting civic participation and are central to the individual’s sense of belonging (White, 1996; Waylen, 1994; Göle, 1994; Kamali, 2006; Birtek, 1994).

Such research has conclusively demonstrated that “civil society” and its institutions can and do exist and play an important part in community formation within a number of different sociopolitical contexts. In such situations they can both rely on and challenge existing communal and relational ties, have undemocratic agendas, and embrace larger societal missions (Keyman & İçgüdü, 2003; Keyman, 2000), whatever their sociopolitical orientation. More importantly, they can help legitimize and solidify the neoliberal state in whatever form it may take. As Foucault points out, every society exists within the framework of a state’s legal regulations, yet at the same time remains “inaccessible to centralized political power. [Civil society is] the correlate of a political technology of government. It is a ‘transactional reality,’ existing at the mutable interface of political power and everything which permanently outstrips its reach. Its contours are thus inherently variable and open to constant modification” (cited in Burchell 1991, pp. 140–141). Following Foucault, it is more productive to conceptualize civil society organizations not so much as apolitical or independent entities pursuing their own distinct agendas, but rather as actual means and technologies of governance that may help or hinder a state’s regulatory power over society. In other words, they are “mutable interfaces” that help construct and give meaning to the varied ideas and representations of the state and its citizenry.

Social scientists working on state-society relations in Turkey have positioned the development of “civil society” (primarily in the 1980s and 90s) as emblematic of democratization, demilitarization and decentralization (Heper & Evin, 1994; Kadioğlu, 2005; Göle, 1994). Pivotal to this analysis has been the interpretation of the public resurgence of Islam in Turkey as crucial to the blossoming of civil society against the state after more than 70 years of state repression against religious orders and public expressions of religion (Heper, 1991;

Göle, 1996; Özdalga, 1997; Mardin, 1969; Pusch, 2000). These scholars were highly influential in pointing out the importance of Islam in the public sphere, in historicizing Turkish civil society by pointing out its rootedness within the Ottoman Empire, and in correcting the Eurocentrism of secular humanists, such as Habermas (1991), who would not have recognized the causal connections between the public resurgence of religious expression with the burgeoning of a vibrant democratic public sphere.

However, the conceptualization of a civil society as one that is formed as an alternative or in opposition to the state runs the risk of constructing an artificial dualism of “state-versus-society,” or “Islam-versus-state,” which falls short of understanding key sociopolitical realities, and Turkey is a prime case-in-point. Far from largely being agents of alternative or counter-hegemonic social agendas, many Turkish Civil society organizations can and should be more accurately conceptualized as necessary partners of states. Seen in this way, civil society organizations allow the researcher to empirically analyze a new form of state governmentality that invests in an idea of civic partnership as a form of state legitimacy and accountability. This, in turn, invites us to question not only the structuring of such partnerships, but also the ways in which they become important in solidifying certain understandings and practices of the state and the citizen with both a representational and a material reality (Mitchell, 2000). As Mitchell (1991) points out, instead of trying to locate a definition that fixes the boundary between state and society, we need to examine how this distinction is produced. I would argue civil society organizations are crucial actors in producing the distinctiveness of the state and the society through embracing civic governance as the model for the modern state, which in turn maintains social and political order. Yet, they also provide a new venue where new communities are formed and citizenship is defined.

The contours of such a representational and material reality can be seen in several of the interviews I conducted. As one donor, Sedat, noted³:

³ Names and other information about the individuals have been changed, and some interviews and information have been aggregated, to ensure anonymity. This was necessary because some of the volunteers and employers I talked to were very active and well-known in the organizations. I met most of my interviewees with the help of the organizations mentioned in the article; once I had initial contact, I was able to meet other donors and volunteers with the help of those I interviewed. Some of the interviews, data, and other related materials used in this article have also been referred to in other earlier publications by the author

The state cannot be everywhere, but I think the state needs to step in and become an organizer of all these charitable institutions. That should be the state's role. Do the monitoring and do the organization and check these places. That should be state's role. Create a space where all these organizations and vakıfs can work together instead of defending their own turf sometimes. State needs help because it is so bureaucratized. I am not saying state is not relevant, but it does not function well. It is a bureaucracy. We are to blame, too. You know the Ottoman did it the right way. We lost so much of our own history. Charity was important to the Ottoman Empire and charity is important to our religion. You know the story about zimem defteri (debt ledger) or sadaka taşları (charity/sadaqa stones), right? Back then there were stones and people had trust. Now we have computers, but we don't trust each other. (Interview with DF Volunteer, Istanbul, 29 July 2008)

When explaining the role civil society organizations play in contemporary Turkey, Sedat's narrative embraces practices and institutions (i.e., *zimem defteri*, charity stones, and/or the *vakıf* institution) that have their origins in the Ottoman Empire. Although hard to trace historically due to its variety, voluntary charity has played a significant role in Muslim societies (Singer, 2008, 2002; Ergin, Neumann, & Singer 2007).⁴ Sedat's narrative mentions three unique forms that other volunteers also noted. *Zimem defteri* was a form of "debt ledger" that listed the names and the amounts owed by a person to a specific merchant. During Ramadan, those who were rich would change their attire to remain incognito and visit grocery shops in unfamiliar neighborhoods and ask the merchant if he had a debt ledger and told him to count a certain number of pages from the ledger and calculate the amount owed listed in those pages. The rich visitor would pay that amount then and thereby obtain the grace of Allah and leave without asking the identity of the people he or she saved from debt. This enabled the poor and the rich to remain anonymous, as prescribed by the jurisprudence on the giving of zakat. Charity stones had a similar stress on the importance of anonymity. Charity stones were pillars with small niches at the top that one would find in neighborhoods and even in front of the Topkapı Palace where the Ottoman Sultan resided. Those who

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The hardship of tracing voluntary charity historically is indeed due to its variety and its anonymous nature. Charity could consist of a coin given to a beggar or a kind act or word with good intent. For various forms of charity in Muslim communities and their significance see Singer (2008, p. 316).

wanted to make donations could visit these stones whenever they wanted and leave a certain amount. Any needy person could then reach up and take the amount required to meet his or her needs, leaving the rest behind for other needy people. This preserved the anonymity of the poor and saved them from shame and, in turn, enabled the rich to gain the grace of Allah.

Aside from these types of charity, which are difficult to quantify and document historically, Sedat's narrative refers to the more regulated and visible institution of the *vakıf*. *Vakıfs* were pious endowments or foundations constituted for a particular specified sacred and charitable purpose, thus rendering the endowments permanent and no longer subject to the laws of inheritance. *Vakıfs* had a registered deed and were irrevocable and unalterable once constituted. These endowments could be constituted for various charitable reasons, ranging from building a new mosque, to preserving an old mosque, to providing for the poor in a specific neighborhood. Unlike the more anecdotal forms of charity, deeds of *vakıfs* were well documented in the Ottoman period. They are still vibrant institutions within the Turkish Republic and work alongside other civil society organizations, such as associations (*dernekler*), that are formed by a group of individuals who get together to work on a specific cause.

Although one difference between *vakıfs* and *derneks*, aside from the way they are founded, might seem to be the religious significance of *vakıfs* as places that allowed the donor to get the approval of Allah (*Allah rızası*) and attain a place in paradise, Sedat's narrative is a good testament to the fact that associations may also retain a religious significance for the volunteer and the donor. In turn, research on *vakıfs* reveals that they served more complex social and economic purposes than attaining the approval of Allah, such as protection of property, tax reduction, gaining and/or maintaining the support of various constituents, and promoting a specific worldview (Singer, 2008). Sedat's discussion on all these various forms of charitable giving point to their political nature and their interconnectedness to the state as an institution that provides for and protects its citizenry. In turn, this citizenry is fashioned into pious individuals and communities through their participation in these diverse civil society organizations and various processes of giving.

Fashioning Pious Citizenry as Political and Social Actors

Whether organized as *vakıfs* or associations, many civil society organizations rely on the charitable donations of the public for their

survival and for the successful distribution of aid for the proposed mission of curbing poverty in Turkey and abroad. Yet it is also a fact that this mission remains limited in scope due to several factors. Buğra (2008) points out that despite the fact the current government sees civil society organizations as a way to curb government spending and delegate its welfare responsibilities, civil society organizations suffer institutional problems and the state is still perceived as the primary agent responsible for alleviating poverty. In her analysis, she relies on a survey study conducted on charity and volunteerism that demonstrates how many civil society organizations face institutional problems by being so dependent on charitable donations and how 38% of the survey respondents still see the state as responsible for alleviating poverty (Tüsev, 2006). Yet, these findings do not shed light on the vibrancy of civil society organizations despite such challenges and, through overemphasizing donations, do not take into consideration the intimate politics of how or why people still invest in these organizations. The same study notes that 80% of the public engages in some form of individual giving and donations made to civil society organizations tend to be bigger in number and constitute 37% compared to 31% of direct giving (Tüsev, 2006, p. 15).

It is true that charity, charitable donations, and volunteering as a form of charitable donation are closely associated with the Islamic virtue of generosity and the duties of Muslims to offer obligatory alms once a year as zakat and to engage in other forms of charitable giving, such as regular donations to the poor (i.e., *sadaqa*). In fact, another survey on philanthropic giving suggests that individuals are motivated mainly by religious obligations (32%) and traditions and customs (26%) and less so from a sense of obligation to serve society (12%) (Çarkoğlu, 2006). Yet, these obligatory or volunteered donations of time, money, or aid-in-kind are wedded to a distinctive sense of patronage, biopolitics, and possible rehabilitation of itinerant street beggars and future criminals. This could be glimpsed by several responses coming from volunteers of different ages and backgrounds in the various interviews quoted below. All of these volunteers visited DFASA and donated both their time and money there and also at other charitable associations:

According to Semiha:

Ben kendimi vakfettim burda [I donated myself here]. I donate my time and, when I have some extra, my money, for Allah rızası [God's grace] first and foremost. Both zakat and sadaqa for me are ways of being closer to God. I give to my neighbors when I can, too, but this is better because I know it goes to those who are really in need and I do not need to feel bad about

humiliating people who are worse off than I. (Interview with DF Volunteer, Istanbul, 10 June 2009)

As İbrahim noted:

Being generous is one of the names of God. We are generous as believers and as a nation. I think it is the obligation we have. I feel my donation of my time and sometimes money here creates a bond between me and the recipient. I may not know the recipient yet I know that she or he is in need for real and that this will be a way to protect that person from bad things like begging in the streets or stealing things. What they do here is more than just distributing food. It is like they integrate people into the nation and save families. (İnsanları milletimize kazandırıyorlar ve aileleri kurtarıyorlar). (Interview with DF Volunteer, Istanbul, 10 June 2009)

Semra pointed out:

I feel like this place gives me an ability to develop my skills and be more disciplined. Coming here I learned how to work in a setting like this, which is invaluable. Also, this place does things like educate people in various skills. I went to their computer classes. So, you become a more productive person and I am proud of that. (Interview with DF Volunteer, Istanbul, 22 July 2008)

Civil society associations provide their volunteers the opportunity to gain valuable skills to become better workers in the capitalist marketplace, better believers through “vakfetmek” (volunteering) themselves, which were both intertwined with and depended on proper identification, reeducation, and “rehabilitation” of the “real” needy, whose needs were always evaluated in light of their immediate family situations. This search of the needy, I would argue, complemented an increasingly changing understanding of the state not as top-down protectionist modernizer, but as sympathetic partner of civil society organizations in a globalized economy. Through participating in the ritual of giving, the volunteers, donors, and employers of charitable organizations gained the grace of God as well as becoming productive members of their societies.

Communal Selves, Service, and Nostalgia for Ottoman Beneficence: Survival in the Neoliberal State

It is outside the purview of this paper to discuss the historical contours of neoliberalization and the growth of the market economy in Turkey. There are already several detailed analyses of these developments within the context of the several coups that marked the history of the Republic (Aytar, 2006; Ünlü, 2006; Keyman, 2000; Buğra & Keyder, 2005; Atasoy, 2004; Göle, 1996; and others). Suffice it to say here that the opening of the Turkish economy to the global market and the continued embrace of neoliberalism and the free market as benchmarks of Turkey's economic and cultural future continue to have deep effects on Turkish society.

In fact, three significant processes have marked the rise of Islamic and conservative civil society organizations as important actors in the political and social scene of Turkey since the 1990s and also aided in the representational and material legitimacy of the neoliberal state as inefficient but benign partners of civil society organizations. First, increasing critical analyses of the state-centered, top-down processes of modernization in the late Ottoman and early Republican eras allowed for the imagination of alternative processes of state formation and modernity that could embrace both the Ottoman past and Islam within the public space (Navaro-Yashin, 2002; White, 2002; Silverstein, 2008). Second, gradual and steady incorporation of the Turkish economy into the global market since the 1950s was marked by increasing rural-urban migration, rising disparities between the rich and the poor, and the dissolution of the protectionist welfare state that favored state-centered development for a neoliberal state that favored the small-medium-sized enterprises and the rising Islamist bourgeoisie (Yavuz, 2006; Atasoy, 2008; Turam, 2007). This rising Islamist bourgeoisie increasingly founded and supported civil society organizations to promote their visions of a just society. Last but not least, all these changes were marked by a legitimacy crisis of the strong-state tradition as a result of continuing charges of corruption within ruling governments, the uncovering of a "deep state," and the complete failure of state organizations to mobilize their resources during the 1999 earthquake (Aytar, 2006; Howe, 2000). These processes should be considered when analyzing the relevance and role of charitable civil society organizations as legitimate partners of the state.

All of the civil society organizations I visited were formed as associations and/or *vakıfs* during the 1990s when neoliberalism and globalization were embraced openly by the state and the government.⁵

⁵ DFASA was officially founded in 1998; IHH in 1995. In fact, the other associations the author visited were also founded within the same time frame: IBS in 1994 and MAZLUMDER in 1991.

Yet, these two decades of intensive neoliberalization and globalization did not eliminate clientelist ties that were deeply rooted in the bureaucratic structure of the state and were highly charged by possibilities of corruption and inefficiency. Kadioğlu (2005) notes how civil society organizations blossomed alongside the “inefficiency associated with political society as well as its corruption.” In the 1990s in Turkey, political corruption brought several leading politicians under the spotlight for years. The public encountered shocking corruption cases where the military, the politicians in power, and the mafia were interlinked.⁶ Additionally, the current ruling party (AKP) perceived corruption largely as a problem of the state resulting in the erosion of public trust in state institutions and governance.⁷ Civil society developed in the 1990s was seen as unmarred by such concerns over corruption and it was perceived to be a means to the increasing democratization of politics.

Hence, the increase in the number of Islamic and conservative civil society organizations, and the current AKP government’s stress on collaborating with civil society, happened within the context of neoliberalization, rising poverty, and rising distrust of state and state institutions due to corruption charges and clientelism. Buğra and Keyder

⁶ Known as the Susurluk incident, a car crash near Susurluk, Balıkesir on November 3, 1996 resulted in the unraveling of social networks that connected the mafia, the police, and the state, which the media and the public dubbed the “deep state.” Riding in the same car were police chief Hüseyin Kocadağ; Abdullah Çatlı, who was a convicted criminal on the run; Çatlı’s girlfriend; and Sedat Bucak, who was the then ruling coalition partner, True Path Party’s deputy. This was the first widely reported incident that highlighted the presence of a deep state that was involved in assassinations and other informal operations against various constituents in Turkey like the Kurds and the Armenians. The public uproar over the incident was coupled with a severe loss of credibility of the state. When it comes to corruption charges, implication of state officials is also not a new phenomenon. For example, former prime ministers Mesut Yılmaz and Tansu Çiller; former economics minister Recep Önal; and former deputy prime minister Hüsametdin Özkan, to name a few, all faced corruption allegations and court cases.

⁷ The current AKP government has made corruption central to its program, as it is a key concern for European Union accession negotiations. In its program that received a vote of confidence on September 5, 2007, corruption was defined as “a fundamental problem that damages the trust relationship between state and its citizens” (Sarlak & Bali, 2008, p. 2). The report released by the Istanbul Chamber of Independent Accountants and Certified Public Accountants noted the negative effect of rapid urbanization, which destroyed social networks, and created social uncertainties that have accelerated the level of corruption in the country (Sarlak & Bali, 2008, p. 4). Only 25% of the public trusted the Parliament and the central government. The public ranked corruption as the third most important problem in Turkey, following inflation and unemployment (Göksel, 2001).

(2005) discuss how civil society organizations that specifically focus on alleviating poverty in Turkey increasingly compartmentalized the poor while shouldering the burdens of globalization that the neoliberalized state was refusing and unable to tackle. If the state is taken to be a discursive, diffuse, and representational construct, then the delegation of poor relief to civil society organizations increasingly support and enable both the representational and real existence of the neoliberal state.

Recent changes in the Turkish political scene have definitely affected charitable associations. For example, the gradual falling out with the Gulen movement dissolved its charitable association (called *Kimse Yok mu*), which, as this article argues, is a testament to the fragile politics of state and civil society in the Turkish context. Although the author did not focus on *Kimse Yok mu* during her research, this organization was far-reaching and extremely popular in Turkish civil society. In fact, I interviewed and spent time with several volunteers of DFASA who also participated in *Kimse Yok Mu* activities and gatherings. However, the rift between Erdogan and Gulen meant the total dissolution of *Kimse Yok Mu*, as their movement was continuously penalized and their adherents were jailed or fled Turkey. The corruption accusations against Burak Erdogan and Reza Zarrab resurfaced many of the doubts about charitable associations, such as DFASA, with close connections to AKP. One of the volunteers of DFASA who was no longer active in the organization voiced concern to me during an informal chat that she was afraid how the unproven corruption charges against the organization would rematerialize and affect aid collection. Additionally, the more recent changes after the attempted coup of July 15, 2016, which resulted in continual top-down suppression of any type of dissent to AKP and the surprise defeat of the AKP in the municipal elections of Istanbul and Ankara in 2019, will undoubtedly further affect the image of charitable associations as well as potentially limit their access to governmental support and resources.

It remains to be seen how these recent developments will affect the sociopolitical dynamics and interplay between state and civil society. In fact, the next step for this researcher is to return and re-interview former volunteers and employers of charitable associations to document the shifts and changes these new times will bring. It will be interesting to further study the responses of volunteers and employers of charitable associations to these recent changes and challenges; however, short communications and social media postings suggest that they are still active and provide an important place of gathering and support for their volunteers and aid recipients. This has always been the case, and my

research shows how volunteers cherish the time spent in these organizations.

Although civil society might not necessarily entail increasing democratization but contain possibilities of essentialist identity claims and anti-democratic ideals (Keyman & İçgüdü, 2003), and although AKP's goal of including civil society organizations in the democratic political process as a means to a more participatory democracy were at times deemed unsuccessful (Tepe, 2005), for all volunteers who were interviewed, their presence in a civil society organization was made meaningful through relational ties that were not deemed as corrupt and ineffective as the relational ties created within state institutions.

Sevim, a vivacious nineteen-year-old, was one of the several young participants in a bazaar sale that DFASA organized to fund its project of housing families who had to come to Istanbul to reside due to a family member needing treatment in a city hospital. The bazaar took place at the guesthouse adjacent to the Cerrahpaşa Mosque close to one of the busiest hospitals in Istanbul called Cerrahpaşa. What started out as a bazaar that would last for a couple of days ended up lasting for more than 40 and was a huge success. The donations of clothing and other materials sold at the bazaar came from donors and employees affiliated with the association. Sevim was also part of a group of students from various universities that congregated to form a youth group at the municipal level to organize volunteering projects at various charitable associations. When I asked her why she participated in volunteering activities, she stated the *huzur* (peace) she felt as a result of such participation, but also noted how, as a young veiled woman, her participation enabled her to be part of a larger community: "I love doing this because I meet people like you. I am a very social person. I am very active and have many friends. I meet people who care and want to do good things here. A lot of people I met here became my closest friends. I have a trust that comes from sharing this place and this experience. That is very important to me" (Interview with DF Volunteer, Istanbul, 20 July 2009).

Valuing a communal self over an individualistic one is not unique to these volunteers. Research conducted in the Middle East and the Mediterranean continuously noted the importance of a communal sense of self as a unique way of realizing selfhood and agency that could not be understood through a Westernized lens that valued individuality and separation from family and community as a way of finding one's self (Marcus, 1992; White, 2004; Delaney, 1999; Dubetsky, 1976). This communal or relational understanding of self is also implicated in ties of reciprocity and dependency that can be conceptualized as clientelist ties

within governments, states, neighborhoods, and families (Öniş, 2003; C. Alexander, 2002; Gellner, 1977). In fact, the importance of families and a familial and communal sense of self are emphasized in the mission statement of AKP, which is also reiterated by the focus of DFASA on helping families and not individuals.⁸ Despite the fact that historically Turkish families have mostly been nuclear, extended networks of kin have been important sources of support in tough times (Dubetsky, 1976). Unfortunately, these ties for new migrants to urban spaces and within neighborhoods are being continuously eroded due to increasing poverty (Buğra & Keyder, 2005). Charitable associations such as DFASA step in to curtail the effects.

Civil society organization volunteers saw themselves as being part of a community that was rooted in the Islamic and Ottoman emphasis on charitable donations without dishonoring and dishonoring the poor. Singer (2008) has provided an excellent historical study on the importance of charitable *vakıfs* and donations in the larger Islamic world and within the Ottoman Empire. As she pointed out, charitable donations and *vakıfs* greatly aided in the political legitimization of the empire and its broad reach. Charitable donations were also integrated into biographical sketches as part of the portraits of the ideal lives for both rulers and ruled, and they might entail not only aid to the needy, but were also a way to gain personal status, political power, and legitimacy (p. 114, 9).

Yet, for the volunteers I talked to, charity was perceived as largely apolitical; it was not the politics that mattered, but the fact that volunteerism provided them the opportunity to form a community of like-minded individuals. The Ottoman past became a touchstone for how this community saw itself foregrounding justice when it comes to aid relief through a genuine respect for the needs of the poor. The loss of confidence in the state's ability to take care of its population was replaced by the imagined reality of an idealized Ottoman past and the increasing responsibility of civil society organizations toward curbing poverty.

Singer (2008) calls these groupings "welfare societies" instead of "welfare states," pointing to the fact that aid relief and charity were central to the formation of communities (p. 183). My research shows the increasing importance of such communities as places of belonging and

⁸ AKP's mission statement and information on the party can be found at <http://www.akparti.org.tr/>. In her work critically analyzing human rights practices and the discourses of political parties, Arat (2017) discusses how AKP's central concern for families instead of individuals when it comes to human rights tends to be problematic, as women's rights remain overshadowed by the concern for families.

trust. It also underlines the importance of these associations to the civilianization and privatization of poor relief. Yet this reading is a partial one. The Ottoman *vakıf* was not open to everyone and civil society organizations in Turkey are not devoid of political agendas and viewpoints. Despite the fact that these spaces provide a sense of community to their volunteers and employees, their effectiveness in curbing poverty and their accessibility to all who are in need remain questionable.

Conclusions: Charitable Communities

For their volunteers and employees, charitable civil society organizations are contradictory places. On one level, they represent new types of communities that bond due to the failure of others, such as neighborhoods and relatives, within the context of neoliberalization. They are contextualized as places where like-minded individuals can meet and possibly change the fate of the poor one family at a time. These communities rely on familiarity and close bonds that are deemed to be more trustworthy than the bureaucratized state institutions reminiscent of an imagined Ottoman past where the Sultan and the empire cared for and felt a religious and moral responsibility for the needy. In this sense, civil society organizations, through their efficiency and honesty, are seen as places of belonging for the citizen who is suspicious and critical of the state.

However, this does not necessarily mean that the presence of the state is any less relevant or that civil society organizations are not subject to challenges to their legitimacy. As discussions with volunteers quoted above show, people tend to contradict their own statements. Sedat, for example, is a proponent of charitable associations, yet, he still feels the state needs to step in and regulate these associations. However, these, at times, contradictory stances did not curtail the value of these charitable communities in creating social capital in terms of trust, social networks, and morality that the state and markets were unable to produce. Charitable civil society organizations acted like glue, creating vertical and horizontal ties between people and institutions both in Ottoman times and within the Turkish Republic while defining the contours of state-citizen relations.

As the responses of the volunteers show, civil society organizations were crucial in the successful governance of the state and society and created citizens' participation in how complex social problems such as poverty were defined and identified. Hence, the emergence of a partnership between civil society organizations and the

state points to a negotiated rather than state-centric governance. The Turkish case is a good example of the complex nature of charitable associations that remain under-studied in civil society literature. It also points to the different ways charitable associations can be viewed and studied in diverse national societies:

- 1) *Charitable civil society organizations necessarily engage in partnership relations with nation-states and it is more effective to view these as continuously negotiated rather than state-centric.*
- 2) *The state uses these relations in the local and global context of political, economic, and social strategies as it seeks to adjust to the changing realities of neoliberal globalization.*
- 3) *In turn, charitable civil society organizations assume the role of the welfare state as they deliver aid and support to those in need while remedying the negative effects of neoliberal globalization.*
- 4) *For individual volunteers and workers, charitable associations and their social projects provide a way to form moral communities, become engaged citizens, and good Muslims.*

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