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## Cultural Heritage as Soft Power: TİKA's Restoration Projects in Diplomacy

*Yumuşak Güç Olarak Kültürel Miras: Diplomaside TİKA'nın Restorasyon Projeleri*

Mehmet Emre AKTUNA<sup>a\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup> TİKA Uzmanı, Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı Başkanlığı (TİKA), Ankara / TÜRKİYE

ORCID: 0000-0002-3826-0962

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### ABSTRACT

The conservation of cultural heritage has emerged as an important element of international development and diplomacy, emphasizing the role of historical landmarks as symbols of identity and intercultural dialogue. This study investigates the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency's (TİKA) heritage restoration projects from 2013 to 2023, analysing their role as instruments of cultural diplomacy, international development and soft power. By focusing on TİKA's initiatives in regions such as the Balkans, Africa, and the Middle East, the research evaluates their contributions to cultural preservation, economic development, and Türkiye's foreign policy objectives. Employing qualitative methods, including thematic analysis and case studies, study examines the alignment of these projects with Türkiye's strategic goals and their reception within local and international contexts. Findings underscore TİKA's strategic use of heritage restoration to foster goodwill and cooperation, strengthen historical connections, and enhance Türkiye's global influence. While these efforts have been praised for preserving global heritage and strengthening bilateral relations, critiques regarding their geopolitical motivations and Neo-Ottoman associations persist. Comparative analysis with similar initiatives by other nations underscores TİKA's distinct emphasis on shared heritage and inclusive approaches. This study enriches the broader discourse on the intersection of heritage conservation, international aid, and cultural diplomacy, while also exploring the role of soft power in shaping global relations.

### ÖZ

Kültürel mirasın korunması, tarihi eserlerin kimlik ve kültürlerarası diyalog sembolleri olarak rolünü vurgulayan, uluslararası kalkınma ve diplomasinin önemli bir unsuru olarak ortaya çıkmıştır. Bu çalışma, Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı Başkanlığı'nın (TİKA) 2013-2023 yılları arasındaki kültürel miras restorasyon projelerini incelemekte ve bu projelerin kültürel diplomasi, uluslararası kalkınma ve yumuşak güç araçları olarak rolünü analiz etmektedir. TİKA'nın Balkanlar, Afrika ve Orta Doğu gibi bölgelerdeki girişimlerine odaklanan araştırma, bu projelerin kültürün korunması, ekonomik kalkınma ve Türkiye'nin dış politika hedeflerine katkılarını değerlendirmektedir. Tematik analiz ve vaka çalışmaları da dahil olmak üzere nitel yöntemler kullanılan bu çalışmada, bu projelerin Türkiye'nin stratejik hedefleriyle uyumunu ve yerel ve uluslararası bağlamlarda nasıl karşılandığını incelenmiştir. Bulgular, TİKA'nın iyi niyet ve işbirliğini teşvik etmek, tarihi bağları güçlendirmek ve Türkiye'nin küresel etkisini artırmak için kültürel miras restorasyonunu stratejik olarak kullandığının altını çizmektedir. Bu çabalar küresel mirasın korunması ve ikili ilişkilerin güçlendirilmesi açısından övgüyle karşılanırken, jeopolitik motivasyonları ve Neo-Osmanlı çağrışımlarına ilişkin eleştiriler de devam etmektedir. Diğer ülkelerin benzer girişimleriyle yapılan karşılaştırmalı analizlerde, TİKA'nın ortak mirasa ve kapsayıcı yaklaşımlara yaptığı vurgunun altı çizilmektedir. Bu çalışma, mirasın korunması, uluslararası yardım ve kültürel diplomasinin kesişimi üzerine daha geniş bir söylemi zenginleştirirken, aynı zamanda küresel ilişkilerin şekillenmesinde yumuşak güç uygulamalarına ilişkin katkıda bulunmaktadır.

\* Sorumlu yazar/Corresponding author.

e-posta: meaktuna@gmail.com

## Introduction

The conservation of cultural heritage has increasingly become a vital component of international development and diplomatic efforts. As cultural heritage sites are symbols of identity and continuity, their restoration and conservation play a pivotal role in fostering intercultural dialogue and sustainable development. Within this context, the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA) has emerged as a significant actor, conducting restoration projects across various regions to preserve historical and cultural landmarks. These projects are often framed as tools of cultural diplomacy and foreign aid, reflecting Türkiye's evolving role on the global stage.

Since its establishment in 1992, TİKA has undertaken numerous projects aimed at fostering development and enhancing cooperation between Türkiye and other nations. Among its diverse portfolio, restoration of architectural heritage has occupied a prominent position, with initiatives carried out in regions such as the Balkans, Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia (Akıllı & Çelenk, 2019). These efforts are in a wide spectrum, but have frequently focused on the restoration of Ottoman-era monuments, mosques, baths, tombs, cemeteries, marketplaces, and many other culturally significant structures. By prioritizing such restoration projects, TİKA's activities have been positioned within a broader narrative of cultural preservation, historical connectivity, and international cooperation and partnership.

The significance of TİKA's heritage restoration projects extends beyond mere architectural conservation. Such efforts are often interpreted as mechanisms for strengthening diplomatic ties, enhancing Türkiye's soft power, and promoting shared cultural heritage. While these projects have been widely praised for their contributions to the preservation of global heritage, they have also been critiqued for aligning too closely with Türkiye's geopolitical ambitions, particularly in territories with historical Ottoman influence and regions with believers of Islam religion.

This study aims to analyse TİKA's architectural heritage restoration projects from 2013 to 2023 as examples of foreign aid. The global scope of TİKA's initiatives will be examined, with specific attention paid to their distribution across regions, the types of cultural heritage projects prioritized, and the outcomes achieved. Furthermore, the extent to which these projects align with cultural diplomacy and development goals will be evaluated. The article seeks to contribute to the understanding of heritage restoration as a tool of international development and Türkiye's foreign policy.

Through this analysis, insights will be offered into the role of TİKA's restoration projects as instruments of cultural goodwill and as potential expressions of strategic influence. The discussion will explore whether these efforts effectively balance the goals of cultural preservation with the broader objectives of foreign aid and diplomacy, contributing to an understanding of TİKA's impact on global heritage conservation.

This study adopts a qualitative research design to investigate TİKA's projects from 2013 to 2023. By focusing on the global scope of TİKA's initiatives, this research seeks to understand the cultural, social, and geopolitical implications of the restoration projects and evaluate their effectiveness. A combination of primary and secondary data sources is utilized to achieve a comprehensive understanding of TİKA's activities, employing thematic analysis, comparative evaluation, and case study approaches to contextualize and assess the outcomes of these restoration efforts.

The study is structured around a qualitative framework, emphasizing the interpretive analysis of documents, reports, and academic literature. A global perspective is adopted to explore the distribution, objectives, and outcomes of TİKA's heritage restoration projects

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across different regions, such as Africa, the Balkans, the Middle East, and Central Asia. The methodology follows an inductive approach, allowing patterns and themes to emerge from the data rather than relying on preconceived hypotheses. The qualitative nature of the research ensures that the nuanced cultural, political, and social dimensions of TİKA's activities are captured.

The data collection process integrates multiple sources to provide a holistic view of TİKA's heritage restoration activities and their broader implications. Primary data is drawn from TİKA's annual reports, which detail the projects completed each year, their geographic distribution, funding allocations, and stated objectives. These reports provide foundational information on the scope and nature of TİKA's initiatives, enabling the categorization of projects by type and by region. Additionally, official project descriptions and documentation available through TİKA's publications are utilized to gain deeper insights into the technical and operational aspects of the restoration efforts.

Secondary data is employed to contextualize the findings from TİKA's reports and to explore the broader academic and policy-related discourse surrounding heritage restoration and cultural diplomacy. Scholarly articles are reviewed to identify themes related to soft power, cultural diplomacy, and geopolitical strategies. Literature on international aid and the role of cultural heritage in global development is also examined to situate TİKA's activities within the wider theoretical framework of soft power.

Media reports and public discourse in recipient countries are analysed to capture local perceptions of TİKA's activities. By examining how these projects are represented in local media and received by communities, the study explores the cultural and social impacts of the restoration efforts. This analysis is supplemented by reviews of Turkish foreign policy publications and discussions on Türkiye's evolving role in international relations to understand the broader diplomatic objectives of TİKA's activities.

Thematic analysis is employed to identify recurring patterns and themes within the collected data. TİKA's projects are categorized by type, region, and stated objectives, and their outcomes are assessed using qualitative indicators. These include the restoration quality, community reception, and integration of the restored sites into local cultural and social contexts.

A case study approach is utilized to provide detailed examinations of specific projects that exemplify TİKA's heritage restoration efforts. Selected case studies from Africa, the Balkans, and the Middle East are analysed to illustrate the cultural, social, and geopolitical impacts of these initiatives. Each case study is assessed against indicators such as alignment with cultural diplomacy objectives, local engagement, and contribution to regional development.

The scope of the study is confined to TİKA's heritage restoration projects completed between 2003 and 2023. The analysis focuses on regions where TİKA has been particularly active, such as Africa, the Balkans, and the Middle East, while acknowledging that data availability may vary across regions. Limitations include potential biases in the representation of TİKA's activities in its official reports and the challenges of obtaining comprehensive secondary data for less-documented regions.

All data used in the study is derived from publicly accessible sources, ensuring transparency and adherence to academic research ethics. Proper citations are provided for all references, and efforts are made to avoid speculative conclusions by grounding interpretations in the analysed data. By employing this methodology, the study aims to provide an understanding of TİKA's heritage restoration projects and their role in cultural preservation, international development, and Türkiye's broader diplomatic strategy. The qualitative

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framework ensures that the diverse cultural, social, and geopolitical dimensions of these efforts are thoroughly explored and contextualized.

By employing this qualitative framework, the study was able to identify how TİKA's restoration activities extend beyond technical conservation to function as strategic tools of soft power. This approach enabled the contextual analysis of how heritage projects are selected, framed, and executed in ways that resonate with shared historical narratives between Türkiye and recipient countries, particularly in regions with Ottoman-era cultural assets. Through documents and secondary sources, the framework facilitated the examination of how these restorations are not only perceived locally but also how they contribute to Türkiye's image as a benevolent and culturally invested actor in the international arena.

Moreover, the qualitative methodology allowed the exploration of intangible outcomes often overlooked in quantitative assessments, such as cultural affinity, symbolic recognition, and identity reinforcement. These dimensions are crucial for understanding the broader diplomatic significance of TİKA's work. For instance, restoration projects that revive historic mosques, schools, or public buildings are often framed by both Türkiye and the host country as acts of cultural solidarity and historical continuity. The framework thus captures how heritage conservation, when embedded in foreign aid programs, becomes a diplomatic gesture that strengthens bilateral relations and advances soft power objectives through non-coercive, culturally resonant means.

### **TİKA's Development Aids as Türkiye's Tool for Soft Power in International Relations**

Power constitutes a central concept in international relations (Barnett & Duvall, 2005), encompassing various forms such as wealth, military authority, civil authority, and influence over opinions (Russell, 2004). This nature of power has prompted scholars to classify it into "hard power" and "soft power," a distinction introduced by Joseph Nye in 1990 (Nye, 1990a). Hard power relies on coercion, using military threats or economic incentives to achieve national interests (Gray, 2011). Historically, this form of power has dominated international relations, with states utilizing it to respond to security threats and protect their sovereignty (Oğuzlu, 2007). In contrast, soft power represents a subtler dimension of influence, characterized by the ability to achieve outcomes through attraction rather than coercion (Nye, 1990b). This approach relies on inspiring admiration for a nation's values, culture, and practices, fostering alignment with its goals.

The increasing economic burden associated with hard power has led many states to adopt soft power strategies, leveraging cultural, historical, economic, and intellectual assets to exert influence (Kalathil, 2011). Türkiye has embraced this shift, utilizing the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA) as a cornerstone of its soft power strategy. Established in 1992 under Statutory Decree No. 480, TİKA was initially tasked with coordinating Türkiye's technical assistance and foreign aid initiatives, focusing on the newly independent Turkic Republics following the dissolution of the Soviet Union (Özkan & Demirtepe, 2012). Over time, its scope expanded significantly, aligning with Türkiye's proactive foreign policy objectives. By 1999, TİKA came under the authority of the Prime Ministry, further solidifying its role in supporting Türkiye's foreign policy priorities through cultural, educational, and economic cooperation (Republic of Turkey, 2011).

The agency underwent significant restructuring in 2011 through a Statutory Decree issued by the Council of Ministers to enhance its effectiveness in technical cooperation and coordination. These changes were formalized in the Official Gazette on November 2, 2011, under No. 28103. Since then, TİKA has emerged as a significant instrument in Türkiye's soft power strategy, directing humanitarian aid, cultural diplomacy, and capacity-building projects

to foster goodwill and strengthen influence through shared historical and cultural ties (Beşgöl, 2024).

TİKA's activities have consistently reflected Türkiye's geopolitical interests and aspirations. Between 2003 and 2013, the agency's budget increased nearly fivefold compared to the period between 1992 and 2002, enabling it to distribute \$1.2 billion in foreign aid to over 100 countries by 2011 (TİKA, 2011). Today, TİKA operates in 150 countries, with 63 Programme Coordination Offices across 61 nations, focusing on regions such as South and Central Asia, the Middle East, and the Balkans (TİKA, 2024a).

Through its initiatives, TİKA has extended its influence globally, exceeding its initial regional focus. Its mission statement emphasizes sustainable development, cultural preservation, and the advancement of shared historical heritage, reinforcing Türkiye's position as a responsible and influential actor in international development cooperation. This strategic use of soft power highlights Türkiye's ability to adapt to the evolving dynamics of international relations, leveraging cultural diplomacy to build relationships, foster mutual understanding, and promote its national interests on a global scale (Akillı & Çelenk, 2018).

### **The Scale and Scope of TİKA's Initiatives as Soft Power Tools**

Established in 1992, the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA) coordinates the bulk of Türkiye's official development assistance and now operates in over 150 countries, with more than 30,000 projects completed as of early 2022 (Butt, 2022). Türkiye's annual development aid volume reached around \$8 billion in 2020 (OECD, 2024), which also reflects the vast scale of Türkiye's activities. By delivering aid across education, health, infrastructure, and cultural heritage sectors, TİKA helps cultivate goodwill and influence abroad, as recipient communities associate Türkiye with positive development contributions and shared cultural ties. The following examples from different regions and sectors illustrate how TİKA's development projects enhance Türkiye's diplomatic relations, international reputation, and cultural presence.

In the Balkans, TİKA's aid has focused on preserving shared heritage and rebuilding social infrastructure, which in turn bolsters Turkey's cultural influence and ties in the region. By 2015, TİKA had funded the restoration of 69 historic sites worldwide (Todorović, 2021). For example, the agency oversaw the reconstruction of iconic Ottoman-era monuments such as the Aladža and Ferhadija mosques in Bosnia-Herzegovina, which had been destroyed during the 1990s and were rebuilt to their former glory (Yağcı, 2025). TİKA has also renovated schools and libraries in Balkan towns (e.g. refurbishing the Motrat Qiriazi school in Prizren, Kosovo, and the Mustafa Kemal Atatürk School in North Macedonia) to support education (TİKA, 2016). These cultural and educational projects serve a dual purpose: they help local communities by preserving heritage and improving services, while also maintaining Turkey's historical legacy abroad. Observers have described this approach as a "win-win scenario," noting that Turkey is "preserving its own culture while spending millions helping other countries," which earns public appreciation and strengthens cultural bonds (Todorović, 2021) (Yağcı, 2025).

Across Middle East and Africa, TİKA has rapidly expanded Türkiye's development footprint, implementing hundreds of projects that address critical needs in health, infrastructure, and agriculture. Since opening its first African office in 2005, TİKA has established 22 country offices and carried out 1,884 projects in 54 African countries from 2017 to 2022 (TİKA, 2022a). The agency has partnered with NGOs to open specialized schools; for instance, agricultural training schools were set up in The Gambia (2012) and Somalia (2013) to promote farming expertise and self-sufficiency (Alio, 2023). However healthcare is a flagship sector and in the last years TİKA conducted 228 health projects on the continent, notably partnering in the

construction and support of major hospitals like the Recep Tayyip Erdoğan Training and Research Hospital in Mogadishu, Somalia (TİKA, 2022a). This 200-bed state-of-the-art hospital, built and run with Turkish support, has become one of Somalia's leading medical facilities and a training centre for local doctors (Touazi, Sau, & Benucci, 2025). Also, in the Palestinian territories, TİKA built the Palestine–Turkey Friendship Hospital in Gaza, a modern 180-bed facility that was the largest hospital in Gaza and significantly expanded the region's healthcare capacity (Islamic University of Gaza, 2022). In addition to building facilities, TİKA sponsors medical missions and training; for example, its programs have provided over 111,000 free health examinations and 7,600 surgeries to patients across African countries, while also training local healthcare staff (TİKA, 2022b). Such high-profile projects visibly demonstrate Turkish goodwill and expertise, enhancing Türkiye's image as a compassionate and capable partner. TİKA has simultaneously invested in other vital infrastructure: for instance, it completed 210 projects in agriculture (supporting farming, livestock, and food security) and dozens of clean water supply projects across Africa in recent years (TİKA, 2022a). These include drilling wells, installing water treatment systems, and improving sanitation, directly benefiting thousands of villagers and addressing urgent humanitarian needs. By delivering tangible improvements in health and livelihoods, Turkey's aid agency has helped establish friendly relations and trust where African communities and leaders increasingly view Türkiye as a reliable development partner rather than an external patron (Touazi, Sau, & Benucci, 2025). Another prominent example is in Palestine, where TİKA funded the construction of an olive processing facility in Khan Yunis (Gaza). This facility enabled 3,500 local farmers to process their harvest, producing about 5,000 tons of olives each year and strengthening the olive oil economy in the region (TİKA, 2022b). The scale of TİKA's Middle East and African programs, from hospitals and schools to wells and agricultural training, has thus translated into greater diplomatic influence for Ankara, bolstering Türkiye's reputation and soft power across the continent (Touazi, Sau, & Benucci, 2025).

TİKA's development assistance in Asia, spanning Central, South, and Southeast Asia, further exemplifies its soft power impact through education and capacity-building. In Central Asia, where Türkiye shares linguistic and cultural bonds, TİKA's early projects centred on educational, social and infrastructure in countries like Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Azerbaijan, and funded training and scholarships for hundreds of students and officials (TİKA, 2024a). These initiatives helped the newly independent republics rebuild their human capital and strengthened Turkey's role as a supportive kin-state. In conflict-affected South Asia, TİKA has likewise been active, particularly in Afghanistan, a key aid recipient. The agency has built and rehabilitated much-needed educational and health facilities there for decades. For example, TİKA reconstructed a large high school in Mazar-i-Sharif with capacity for 7,000 students (TİKA, 2016), providing modern classrooms to a war-torn region. More recently, it renovated two schools in Kunduz province, improving classroom conditions and electricity supply for about 2,500 students and teachers (Daily Sabah, 2024). Afghan officials praised these projects as "*exceeding expectations*" and local communities expressed gratitude, calling the school improvements an important step in strengthening the "*bonds of friendship*" between Türkiye and Afghanistan (Daily Sabah, 2024). Such outcomes underscore how development aid directly enhances Turkey's soft power: by investing in education, healthcare and cultural preservation in Asian countries, Türkiye not only fosters socio-economic development but also deepens bilateral affinities and trust. In the long term, these TİKA-led projects elevate Türkiye's diplomatic profile in Asia, reinforcing its image as a benevolent regional partner and culturally connected nation committed to the shared future of these communities.

The above examples draw on TİKA's official reports and independent analyses of Turkish aid, illustrating the wide-ranging scope and soft power benefits of Türkiye's development assistance programs. Each case, from restoring Ottoman heritage in the Balkans to building hospitals in Africa and schools in Asia, demonstrates how TİKA's concrete aid projects translate into goodwill abroad. By quantifiably improving livelihoods and preserving cultural ties, TİKA serves as an effective instrument of Turkish foreign policy, enhancing Türkiye's influence through generosity and cooperation rather than coercion and this strategic use of development aid solidifies Turkey's international relationships and standing, validating the notion that "*soft power*" can be grown through sustained, on-the-ground engagement in global development (Todorović, 2021) (Touazi, Sau, & Benucci, 2025).

### **Heritage Conservation as Cultural Diplomacy**

Heritage conservation has increasingly been recognized as a significant tool in cultural diplomacy, serving as a means for countries to strengthen international relationships, project soft power, and promote their national interests (Chan, 2020). This practice involves the preservation and promotion of cultural heritage sites and artifacts, often facilitated through international collaborations and aid programs. By safeguarding cultural assets, nations are able to assert their cultural identity and engage with the global community on a deeper level.

The role of heritage conservation in shaping and projecting national identity is particularly noteworthy. Cultural heritage serves as a tangible representation of a nation's history, values, and contributions to global civilization. Through the preservation of heritage, countries present themselves to the world in a manner that emphasizes their uniqueness and cultural richness. This approach aligns with the concept of soft power, where influence is achieved through attraction rather than coercion, enabling nations to garner respect and admiration globally (Nye, 1990b) (Siebrandt, 2016). By leveraging cultural heritage, states can inspire positive perceptions and voluntary alignment with their values and goals, reinforcing their influence on the global stage (Akagawa, 2014).

International collaboration constitutes another vital dimension of heritage conservation in cultural diplomacy. Many restoration projects are implemented as joint efforts between nations, involving the exchange of expertise, material resources, and financial aid. These collaborations not only ensure the preservation of cultural sites but also foster trust, mutual understanding, and reciprocal relationships. For instance, Japan has strategically incorporated heritage conservation into its cultural diplomacy initiatives. Through its foreign aid programs, Japan has deployed expertise in heritage preservation to enhance its international presence and portray itself as a responsible global citizen (Akagawa, 2014). This strategy is closely tied to Japan's national identity and its efforts to expand its soft power both globally and within the Asian region.

Similarly, Scotland has engaged in heritage conservation projects in India since 2008, focusing on restoring colonial-era sites and documenting historically significant landmarks. These initiatives have been instrumental in preserving shared historical connections, showcasing Scotland's expertise in heritage conservation, and fostering diplomatic ties between the two nations (Clarke, 2014). However, such efforts have also raised questions regarding cultural colonialism, particularly in light of the complex colonial histories shared by these countries. While these projects contribute to cultural preservation and goodwill, they must be approached with sensitivity to historical contexts to avoid perpetuating imbalances of power.

European development aid has increasingly supported cultural diplomacy through heritage restoration. The United Kingdom's Cultural Protection Fund (established 2016) finances projects to safeguard endangered heritage in conflict-affected regions. For example, a UK-funded initiative in Lebanon trained local artisans to restore Beirut's historic houses

damaged by war and the 2020 port explosion. The project, “Training in Restoration Techniques for Traditional Houses, Beirut,” carried out repairs on traditional homes, built local conservation skills, and produced a toolkit for protecting the Old City’s architecture (British Council, 2021). Similarly, France has made architectural heritage a development priority. Following a 2018 agreement between President Emmanuel Macron and Ethiopia’s Prime Minister, France’s development agency (AFD) launched a €5 million program to help preserve the 12th-century rock-hewn churches of Lalibela in Ethiopia. Initiated in 2019 and formalized in 2023, this ongoing project aims to restore eleven UNESCO-listed medieval churches, train Ethiopia’s heritage authority, and foster sustainable tourism around this pilgrimage site. By investing in iconic sites like Lalibela, France seeks both to safeguard a key piece of Ethiopian cultural identity and to spur local economic development through heritage tourism (AFD, 2023).

Germany’s state-led aid programs also emphasize cultural heritage restoration across diverse regions. The German Federal Foreign Office’s Cultural Preservation Program has supported roughly 2,800 preservation projects in 144 countries since 1981 (Deutschland, 2017). In Southeast Asia, for example, Germany co-financed a multi-year restoration of Indonesia’s Borobudur Temple after it was blanketed in volcanic ash in 2010. German conservation experts worked with UNESCO and Indonesian authorities from 2011 to 2017 to develop new stone preservation techniques, train local staff, and successfully clean and conserve Borobudur’s elaborate bas-reliefs (Deutschland, 2017). In the Middle East, Germany has aided post-conflict heritage revival in Palestine: in Gaza, an early 19th-century mansion known as Al-Ghussein House was restored in 2020 through a partnership between the Goethe-Institut and local organizations, funded by the German Foreign Office. The project preserved the building’s Ottoman-era architectural features and repurposed the once-derelict residence into a cultural community centre. Today the Al-Ghussein House stands “resplendent in its historic beauty” as a venue for film screenings, exhibitions and civic events, demonstrating Germany’s cultural diplomacy in action (Goethe Institut, 2023).

The United States has likewise used development aid to support cultural heritage restoration as a form of soft power. In Jordan, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) funded the Sustainable Cultural Heritage Through Engagement of Local Communities Project (SCHEP) from 2014 to 2024, a decade-long initiative to preserve archaeological sites and involve communities in their management. This program helped protect sites like the Madaba mosaic parks and trained Jordanians in conservation, creating jobs in tourism and conservation along the way. In Egypt, USAID’s recent “Cultural Heritage Tourism II” project built a new artifact storage facility at Luxor’s Karnak Temple and improved visitor infrastructure at the ancient site of Abydos. These efforts not only conserved historic monuments but also supported local employment in construction, site maintenance and tourism (Carruthers, 2025). Even in conflict and post-conflict settings, U.S. aid has played a role in architectural restoration. Notably, the Herat Citadel in Afghanistan, which is a 15th-century fortress devastated by war was restored between 2008 and 2011 with support from the U.S. Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation (and co-funding from Germany). Hundreds of Afghan craftsmen were employed to rebuild the citadel’s ancient walls and towers, which reopened as a museum and cultural centre symbolizing hope for Afghanistan’s recovery (Associated Press, 2011). Through such projects in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia, the U.S. has invested in protecting heritage as a means to engage communities and promote stability.

China has emerged as a prominent development partner in cultural heritage preservation, using restoration projects to strengthen diplomatic ties across Asia. After Nepal’s 2015 earthquake, Chinese experts jointly undertook a five-year project to rehabilitate the famous Basantapur Palace (Hanuman Dhoka) temple complex in Kathmandu’s Durbar Square.

Completed in 2022, this restoration returned the nine-story pagoda palace to its former glory, with Nepal's officials praising the Chinese team's meticulous attention to authenticity (Ma Chi, 2023). China has also extended its cultural aid to Southeast Asia: it has been "actively involved in the restoration" of Cambodia's Angkor Archaeological Park and the mountaintop Preah Vihear Temple, both UNESCO World Heritage Sites. Working in partnership with Cambodian authorities, Chinese conservation teams have helped stabilize temple structures and conserve delicate carvings at these sites in recent years (Ma Chi, 2023). These projects form part of a broader Chinese cultural diplomacy push launched in 2019, in which China committed to protect Asian heritage and share expertise. By 2023, Beijing even initiated an Alliance for Cultural Heritage in Asia to coordinate such efforts (Chengqiong, 2023). Through actions like restoring temples, palaces and monuments abroad, China has transitioned from being a beneficiary of international heritage aid to an active contributor, leveraging cultural preservation as a means of fostering goodwill and "people-to-people" connections. (Ma Chi, 2023)

The scope of heritage diplomacy has expanded in recent years, moving beyond the preservation of tangible cultural assets to include intangible cultural heritage. Practices such as traditional crafts, oral histories, and performing arts are increasingly recognized as powerful tools for fostering international relationships. This shift reflects a growing understanding of cultural heritage as a "contact zone," facilitating people-to-people connectivity, dialogue, and reciprocal cooperation (Lähdesmäki & Čeginskas, 2022). By integrating intangible elements into their cultural diplomacy strategies, nations can engage more dynamically with diverse communities, fostering inclusivity and deeper cultural connections.

Each of these examples from British-backed restorations in Beirut to Chinese projects in Kathmandu highlights how state-led development agencies are investing in cultural heritage worldwide. Such initiatives preserve treasured architectural sites and traditions, while also advancing foreign policy goals: strengthening local capacities, supporting tourism and economic growth, and deepening cross-cultural ties in regions ranging from Africa to Asia. The restoration of historic architecture has thus become a shared tool of international development and cultural diplomacy, employed by global powers in pursuit of both preservation and partnership

Heritage conservation has become a significant and complicated tool in cultural diplomacy, blending efforts to preserve historical and cultural assets with broader goals of international relationship-building and influence. By leveraging both tangible and intangible heritage, nations can enhance their soft power, assert their cultural identity, and navigate complex historical and geopolitical landscapes. However, these efforts must be carried out with inclusivity and cultural sensitivity to ensure that they contribute to genuine mutual understanding and respect in the global arena.

### **TİKA's Restoration Activities in the Light of Annual Reports**

In the years of TİKA's operations, particularly starting in 2013, detailed information regarding its projects, sectors, and regional distributions was systematically presented in its annual reports. These reports also included the names of countries benefiting the most from TİKA's initiatives. For example, in 2013, 80.9% of the total budget was allocated to social infrastructure and services, 12.9% to economic infrastructure, and 5.7% to production sectors. Within the social infrastructure category, restoration projects accounted for 14.78% of expenditures. Regional distributions highlighted Africa (33.7%) as the primary beneficiary, followed by South and Central Asia (21.83%), the Middle East (21.74%), and the Balkans and Eastern Europe (21.4%). Countries such as Palestine (20.20%), Tunisia (12.24%), and Somalia (10.71%) received the highest share of aid during this period (TİKA 2014).

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By 2014, TİKA's reports indicated \$191.8 million in collaborative projects, with Palestine receiving \$31.22 million, followed by Afghanistan (\$24.70 million) and Bosnia and Herzegovina (\$14.2 million). Restoration and cultural cooperation projects accounted for \$30.73 million, ranking second among social infrastructure initiatives (TİKA, 2015). While this detailed level of reporting continued into 2015, subsequent years saw significant changes in the reporting structure. From 2016 onwards, TİKA shifted to presenting only percentages of expenditures by departments, with fewer specific details about projects, countries, or restoration activities. Selected examples were occasionally highlighted, but comprehensive project lists were no longer included. For instance, in 2015, TİKA reported the restoration of over 100 structures across 18 countries in three continents. This included 28 completed restorations in seven Balkan countries and 13 restorations across three African nations (TİKA, 2016). However, by 2016, the reports moved toward aggregated data without naming specific projects or countries, focusing instead on the proportional allocation of resources among regional departments. For example, 44.51% of total expenditures were directed to the Middle East and Africa, while 11.04% went to the Balkans and Eastern Europe (TİKA, 2017). Subsequent reports from 2017 to 2023 followed this format, detailing the percentage distributions of expenditures but providing minimal specifics about individual restoration efforts. In 2017, for instance, restoration projects included 13 mosques and tombs and seven other historical sites (TİKA, 2018a). By 2018, the focus included nine mosques and nine other structures such as bazaars and historic buildings (TİKA, 2018b). The numbers were sixteen restoration projects in 2019 (TİKA, 2019b), seven completed and ten ongoing restoration projects in 2020 (TİKA, 2020) and lastly, eight restoration projects were completed in 2021 (TİKA, 2022c). In the most recent reports, such as those from 2022 and 2023, TİKA highlighted ongoing restoration efforts but offered only a few selected examples. For example, in 2022, TİKA stated that only three restorations were completed while work on seven others was ongoing (TİKA, 2023) and two restoration projects in 2023 (TİKA, 2024b). This evolution in reporting also reflects a broader institutional shift. While early reports emphasized detailed project descriptions, later years prioritized aggregate data and general overviews of activity. Despite these changes, the reports continue to underscore TİKA's commitment to preserving shared cultural and historical heritage, albeit with less number and emphasis on granular details of individual restoration projects. This shift complicates efforts to analyse specific outcomes and regional impacts, particularly in restoration and cultural cooperation initiatives. However, the regional distribution of TİKA's restoration efforts underscores Türkiye's intent to preserve shared historical and cultural heritage, particularly in areas with historical Ottoman influence. By focusing on the Balkans, Middle East, and parts of Africa and Asia, TİKA's projects not only aimed at conserving architectural heritage but also at strengthening diplomatic ties and enhancing Türkiye's soft power in these regions. TİKA's architectural heritage conservation projects between 2013 and 2023 reflect a deliberate strategy to leverage cultural heritage as a tool for international engagement.

TİKA invests a considerable amount in restoration projects annually, focusing on mosques, tombs, historical sites, marketplaces, fortresses and many others. Although no specific figures were provided in the annual reports for 2013 and 2014, the 2015 annual report stated that "over the past three years, efforts have been conducted to restore more than 100 works across 18 countries on three different continents. In this context, 28 works were restored and opened to service in seven different countries across the Balkans, while feasibility studies for the project planning of nearly 30 additional works were completed. In Africa, a total of 41 works, including 13 in three different countries, were restored. Restoration of 24 additional works located in various countries is expected to be completed within the upcoming year. Furthermore, project planning activities for 32 works are ongoing." (TİKA, 2016). Between 2016 and 2020, the agency successfully completed numerous projects, with 5 completed in

2016 (TİKA, 2017), 20 in 2017 (TİKA, 2018a), 18 in 2018 (TİKA, 2018b), 16 in 2019 (TİKA, 2019b), and 17 in 2020 (TİKA, 2020). It is evident that the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 significantly altered global priorities, leading to a redirection of TİKA's focus towards other themes, as reflected in its annual reports. According to the agency, eight projects were completed in 2021 (TİKA, 2022c). In 2022, it was reported that "our institution continues to carry out cultural cooperation activities aimed at preserving our shared historical and cultural heritage abroad. Last year, restoration work was completed on three of ten historical structures, while restoration efforts for the remaining seven are ongoing" (TİKA, 2023). By 2023, it is stated in the annual report that only two projects were completed (TİKA, 2024b). However despite this shift, TİKA remains a globally significant organization in heritage restoration and the leading institution in the Balkans (Todorović, 2021).

TİKA's restoration projects demonstrate a significant commitment to preserving cultural heritage across diverse regions, reflecting the agency's dual objectives of safeguarding historical assets and fostering international goodwill. These efforts, particularly in the Middle East, Africa, and the Balkans, underscore TİKA's adaptability and its strategic alignment with Türkiye's cultural diplomacy priorities. Additionally, restoration initiatives undertaken by other international institutions highlight the global importance of heritage conservation as a tool for cultural diplomacy and development.

In the Middle East, TİKA has undertaken several impactful restoration projects that contribute to the preservation of cultural and historical landmarks. The renovation of the Qaysariya Bazaar in Kirkuk represents one such effort, aiming to revitalize a historic commercial centre integral to the city's cultural fabric (Salehi, 2019). Similarly, the restoration of the Shrine Complex of Abdul Qadir Gilani in Baghdad has preserved one of the most significant religious and historical sites in Iraq. This project not only safeguarded the structural integrity of the mosque and its surrounding complex but also ensured the continuity of its role as a centre for religious education and community activities (Chishti, 2020). Other notable projects in the region include the restoration and renovation of the clock tower central Al-Tall square in Tripoli, Lebanon, an architectural landmark reflecting Ottoman-era heritage (Di Peri & Maritato, 2024) and the historical church in the small village of El-Kfeir, close to Lebanon's southern border with Israel (MEMO, 2022). In Hebron, Palestine; the restoration of historical houses in the Old City is financed by TİKA and implemented by the Hebron Rehabilitation Committee. Here, TİKA implemented a project encouraging Palestinians to return to their homes by improving local living conditions, illustrating the agency's integration of cultural heritage conservation with broader social and political objectives (Hebron Rehabilitation Committee, 2021).

In addition to TİKA's efforts, other institutions have contributed to cultural heritage preservation in the Middle East. For example, USAID supported the establishment of the Syriac Heritage Museum in Iraq, aimed at preserving the cultural and historical identity of the region's diverse communities. This initiative highlights the role of international organizations in complementing local efforts to protect the cultural heritage (McLinden, 2021) (Shafaq News, 2021).

In Africa, TİKA has undertaken ambitious restoration projects to preserve historically significant Islamic sites. The Tomb of Najashi in Ethiopia is a prime example, where TİKA worked to restore and protect a site of profound Islamic and historical significance. The completed project ensured the preservation of the tomb's structural integrity, contributing to the conservation of Ethiopia's Islamic heritage (Getachew, 2024). Similarly, in Sudan, TİKA focused on restoring Ottoman-era structures on Sawakin Island, preserving the historical identity of this critical Red Sea port (Kucukgocmen & Khalid Abdelaziz, 2017). Another notable project includes the restoration of the Ketchaoua Mosque in Algeria, a 500-year-old

landmark symbolizing Algeria's independence struggle. This restoration ensured the mosque's continued cultural and historical significance, reflecting TİKA's emphasis on safeguarding shared heritage (Métaoui, 2018). Adding to these efforts, other international agencies have also contributed to heritage preservation in Africa. For instance, the French Development Agency (AFD) played a vital role in the restoration and development of the heritage site at Lalibela, Ethiopia. This project preserved the iconic rock-hewn churches, reinforcing their status as a UNESCO World Heritage site while promoting sustainable tourism and community engagement (AFD, 2021).

In the Balkans, TİKA's projects have primarily focused on preserving Ottoman-era monuments, reflecting Türkiye's shared historical and cultural ties with the region. The restoration of the Ethem Bey Mosque in Tirana (Maxharraj, 2022) (Telegrafi, 2020) and King's Mosque in Berat (Telegrafi, 2022) (ATA, 2020), Albania, is a significant example, where efforts were made to preserve the significant values and historical architectures of the mosques. Similarly, the Yashar Pasha Mosque in Pristina, Kosovo, underwent restoration to maintain its architectural integrity and ensure its continued use as a place of worship (Aktuna, 2014). In Serbia, TİKA contributed to the restoration of the Ram Fortress, safeguarding one of the most iconic historical sites at the coast of the Danube in Smederevo, Serbia (Podunavlje, 2017). And lastly, in Visegrad, Bosnia and Hercegovina, the conservation and restoration of the exceptionally significant bridge, Mehmed Paša Sokolović (Drina) Bridge was completed by the efforts of TİKA (Vujović, 2018). These projects underscore TİKA's commitment to revitalizing cultural landmarks, fostering stronger bilateral relations, and promoting the region's historical identity. Other institutions have also implemented projects in the Balkans. For instance, the European Union, in collaboration with UNESCO, supported cultural heritage revival projects across the Western Balkans. This initiative focused on preserving historic sites, promoting cultural tourism, and fostering regional cooperation (EEAS, 2018).

### **Cultural Heritage as Soft Power and Unity Tool**

TİKA's architectural restoration projects are a prominent aspect of Turkey's soft power strategy in former Ottoman territories. By reviving shared heritage, Turkey aims to foster goodwill and "continuity of spiritual ties". In the Balkans, where the Ottoman legacy is strong, TİKA has restored around 90 historic monuments as of 2023 (TİKA, 2019a). Mahmut Çevik, a TİKA vice president, notes that these restorations "*revive [monuments'] original identities and reinforce awareness of unity and solidarity in the region,*" contributing to social peace (Daily Sabah, 2023). In other words, rehabilitating a long-neglected mosque or heritage site often becomes a symbolic bridge between communities, allowing people of different faiths or ethnicities to celebrate a common historical asset. TİKA reports that such activities "*enable kin and related communities to preserve their identities*" and strengthen cultural bonds among groups that share the restored legacy (Daily Sabah, 2023).

Critically, host countries largely perceive these efforts as mutual heritage preservation rather than neo-imperialism. For example, TİKA-funded projects have been welcomed in Serbia, which is a predominantly Christian nation often wary of Ottoman nostalgia. Locals expressed excitement that Ottoman sites were being saved "*no matter who is funding the process,*" with only fringe nationalist elements objecting. Indeed, Serbia could not afford large-scale restorations on its own, so TİKA's help was appreciated for bringing historic monuments back to life. As a result, Serbian citizens gained refurbished attractions that provide value to the country, such as the Ram Fortress on the Danube (an Ottoman-era fort) which is now "*a very important tourist attraction,*" and the Valide Sultan Mosque in Sjenica, which, though modest in tourist appeal, again serves the local Muslim community (Todorović, 2021). These outcomes illustrate how heritage diplomacy can both preserve cultural identity and enhance Turkey's image as a benevolent partner.

One of the clearest post-restoration outcomes is increased tourism, which translates into economic benefits for local populations. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, TİKA's restoration of iconic mosques destroyed in the 1990s war has drawn back visitors in large numbers. For instance, the 16th-century Ferhadija Mosque in Banja Luka, which was rebuilt with TİKA's help and reopened in 2016, saw an immediate surge in tourist visits. "*Thousands of tourists from Arab countries, Turkey and Europe*" now visit Banja Luka to see the beautiful Ferhadija Mosque, with 200–300 tourists daily (and up to 1,500–2,000 on weekends) after its restoration. Local religious leaders report that this influx of visitors "*remarkably increased*" the city's tourist traffic and revenue. Neighbouring communities, including Orthodox Christian residents who were initially sceptical, came to appreciate the economic boon. In the town of Foča, the Ottoman Hünkar Mosque (restored by TİKA and reopened in 2018) was at first met with hostility by some Serb locals. But "after [they] observed these historical restoration projects benefit all as [the town's] tourism revenue" grew, scepticism turned into "silent consent" (Erkuş, 2017). The newfound tourist interest changed perceptions and the locals saw that preserving a mosque could enrich everyone in the town, not just the Muslim minority.

Crucially, these projects often heal social rifts while stimulating tourism. Restoring Ferhadija Mosque not only brought back a UNESCO-listed architectural gem, but also restored a piece of the city's soul. One Bosnian resident noted that "*our Orthodox friends thanked us, saying that when the mosque was destroyed, one piece had been taken from the people of the city*" – its absence was felt by all, and its rebirth became a rendezvous point for locals once again (Erkuş, 2017). This highlights how cultural restoration can mend the urban social fabric, encouraging community engagement across ethnic lines. Tourists too are drawn to such stories of reconciliation and resilience, further boosting visitor numbers.

In Albania, TİKA's restorations have similarly enhanced tourism potential. The agency has renovated at least nine Ottoman-era mosques and landmarks across Albania, including the historic Ethem Bey Mosque in central Tirana (Daily Sabah, 2022). This mosque, a national cultural monument built in the 18th century, underwent a comprehensive TİKA-led restoration from 2018 to 2021 and reopened to great fanfare (TİKA, 2021). President Erdoğan of Turkey and Prime Minister Edi Rama of Albania jointly inaugurated the restored Ethem Bey Mosque as "*a sign of friendship and brotherhood*" between the two nations; and beyond symbolism, the project was tied to developing Albania's tourism: TİKA explicitly stated that protecting common heritage goes hand-in-hand with efforts to "*develop tourism of the country*" (Daily Sabah, 2022). Indeed, the visually stunning mosque, which is situated on Tirana's main square, is now expected to draw more international tourists and enrich the capital's cultural tourism circuit. Local interest was also immense, people from all over Albania flocked to the mosque's reopening, reflecting pride and community enthusiasm for their heritage's revival (TİKA, 2021).

Beyond economics, TİKA's heritage projects carry significant social and cultural benefits. They often revitalize local pride, provide public spaces for cultural activities, and encourage the public to re-engage with historic sites. In some cases, restoration has even encouraged displaced or marginalized communities to return and reclaim their heritage. A striking example comes from Palestine: in the Old City of Hebron, TİKA has funded the restoration of dozens of Ottoman-era houses around the Ibrahimi Mosque. This effort, implemented with the Hebron Rehabilitation Committee since 2019, aimed to preserve the architectural heritage and "*boost the morale of the people*" living under difficult conditions. Residents report that the project has "*contributed to the return of Palestinians*" who had fled harassment and violence – with many families moving back into the renovated homes in Hebron's historic quarter. In fact, about 10,000 Palestinians have returned to some 2,000 restored homes in Hebron since the late 1990s as various restoration initiatives (including

TİKA's) made the area liveable again (Daily Sabah, 2021). This case illustrates how heritage restoration can bolster community resilience, counteract depopulation, and resist efforts of erasure in conflict zones. The Hebron mayor noted that the Old City's population climbed from merely 400 two decades ago to around 5,000 today, thanks in part to the rehab of homes and infrastructure that lured shopkeepers and residents back (Daily Sabah, 2021). In short, saving cultural heritage here directly supported the social fabric and continuity of a threatened community.

Elsewhere in the Balkans, restored sites are often actively used by local people, not just left as static monuments. In Serbia, for example, TİKA rebuilt the Ram Fortress on the Danube – now a tourist site – and also restored the Valide Sultan Mosque in Sjenica, which is again a working mosque serving its congregation (Todorović, 2021). The value of the latter is largely communal: though not a major tourist draw, it provides a sense of normalcy and cultural dignity to the local Muslim minority, showing that their heritage is acknowledged and preserved. Such projects can improve inter-community relations by demonstrating respect for all cultural legacies in a multi-ethnic society. Christian communities have also come to support TİKA's works when they see inclusive benefits. Initially, some Balkan Christians viewed Turkish-funded mosque restorations with suspicion, fearing a political agenda. But this has been changing – as one TİKA official observed, once people see that “*extensive restoration and development projects... bring tourism gain for all citizens,*” scepticism fades and doubtful attitudes turn into acceptance or cooperation. Notably, Turkey has also shown willingness to assist non-Islamic heritage: for instance, local authorities in Mostar (Bosnia) even asked TİKA to help restore a historic Catholic cathedral, recognizing the agency's restoration expertise and goodwill (Erkuş, 2017).

TİKA's heritage restorations have become a form of cultural diplomacy, often explicitly recognized by leaders on both sides. Host governments frequently praise Turkey for helping save shared history. In Algeria, the Ottoman-era Ketchaoua Mosque in Algiers, which is a 17th-century structure and symbol of Algerian independence, was splendidly restored by TİKA between 2014 and 2018 (TİKA, 2018c) (TİKA, 2018d). At the grand reopening, Algeria's President Bouteflika personally thanked Turkish officials, and a plaque was hung commemorating the “*Turkish-Algerian cooperation*” that made the project possible (TİKA, 2018d). The joint inauguration ceremonies of such sites (often attended by Turkish dignitaries and local leaders) underscore how restoration projects improve bilateral relations. In Albania, TİKA's work “*contributes to the diplomatic and economic relationship*” between Tirana and Ankara, according to the agency's country coordinator (Anadolu Agency, 2015). By visibly investing in local development and heritage, Turkey gains goodwill and a positive reputation. A scholarly analysis points out that these projects are fulfilling their purpose as soft power: citizens in recipient countries increasingly view Turkey as a partner preserving “*our commonwealth*” of history. Rather than seeing an imposition of foreign influence, many locals interpret it as Turkey sharing resources to protect a “*common cultural heritage*” that belongs to everyone (Todorović, 2021).

In several cases, restored sites have become focal points for cultural exchange and education. For instance, TİKA often pairs restorations with related initiatives like publishing guidebooks, organizing cultural events, or twinning cities. In Jerusalem, TİKA has supported guides and materials to promote the history of Ottoman-era sites to visitors (Firat, 2017). Meanwhile, in the Balkans, Turkey opened Yunus Emre Institutes to further people-to-people connections. The overall effect is a tapestry of cultural diplomacy where bricks-and-mortar conservation complements educational outreach, reinforcing Turkey's image as a custodian of heritage.

TİKA's restoration projects operate at the intersection of cultural diplomacy and soft power, serving both as expressions of cultural goodwill and as instruments of strategic geopolitical influence. On one hand, these initiatives aim to preserve and promote shared cultural heritage, fostering mutual understanding and strengthening cultural ties with host countries. For instance, the restoration of Ottoman-era monuments in the Balkans underscores a commitment to shared historical narratives. On the other hand, such projects enhance Turkey's soft power by projecting a positive national image and extending its influence in regions of strategic interest. By investing in cultural preservation abroad, Turkey not only safeguards heritage but also positions itself as a benevolent actor on the global stage, thereby advancing its foreign policy objectives.

TİKA's restoration efforts exhibit notable regional variations, reflecting Turkey's tailored approach to its foreign policy priorities. In the Balkans, the focus on rehabilitating Ottoman-era structures aligns with Turkey's intent to reinforce historical and cultural connections, thereby strengthening its presence in a region with deep-rooted historical ties. In Africa, projects often target significant Islamic heritage sites, aiming to preserve cultural identity and support post-conflict reconstruction, which aligns with Turkey's broader strategy of solidarity with Muslim-majority countries. In the Middle East, restoration initiatives frequently concentrate on sites of religious and cultural significance, contributing to regional stability and showcasing Turkey's role as a custodian of Islamic heritage. These differentiated strategies underscore TİKA's adaptability and Turkey's nuanced approach to international engagement.

Overall, these case studies highlight the transformative potential of heritage conservation in fostering cultural diplomacy and strengthening international relations. By preserving historical landmarks, institutions such as TİKA and other international organizations contribute to the continuity of cultural identities, the promotion of mutual respect, and the cultivation of global goodwill.

### Discussion

TİKA's restoration projects exhibit regional variations in approach and focus, reflecting the agency's adaptability to local contexts and priorities. In the Balkans, efforts have concentrated on restoring Ottoman-era monuments, such as mosques and bridges, underscoring shared historical and cultural ties between Türkiye and the region. These initiatives aim to preserve the architectural heritage of the Ottoman period, fostering cultural continuity and strengthening bilateral relations. In Africa, projects have often targeted significant Islamic heritage sites, aiming to preserve cultural identity and support post-conflict reconstruction. The restoration of the Tomb of Najashi in Ethiopia exemplifies TİKA's commitment to safeguarding Islamic historical sites, thereby reinforcing cultural bonds and promoting regional stability. In the Middle East, TİKA has focused on restoring key religious and cultural landmarks, such as the Shrine Complex of Abdul Qadir Gilani in Iraq. These projects not only preserve cultural heritage but also contribute to the revitalization of communities affected by conflict, supporting social cohesion and resilience. These regional strategies underscore TİKA's adaptability to local contexts and priorities.

The restoration initiatives undertaken by TİKA have yielded multifaceted benefits across cultural preservation, economic development, and diplomatic relations. TİKA's restoration projects have contributed in safeguarding historical sites, ensuring their continued use and appreciation by future generations. By restoring structures such as mosques, bridges, and cultural complexes, TİKA has preserved architectural integrity and historical authenticity. This preservation not only maintains the physical embodiments of cultural heritage but also reinforces community identity and continuity. For instance, the restoration of the Ketchaoua

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Mosque in Algeria has revitalized a symbol of national heritage, fostering a renewed sense of pride among local populations.

Economically, the restoration of heritage sites has significantly boosted tourism, generating income and employment opportunities for local communities. Restored landmarks attract both domestic and international visitors, leading to increased demand for services such as hospitality, guided tours, and local crafts. This influx stimulates the local economy, encouraging the development of small businesses and infrastructure. The revitalization of the Drina Bridge in Bosnia and Herzegovina or Ram Fortress in Serbia, for example, has transformed the area into a tourist destination, contributing to regional economic growth.

Diplomatically, TİKA's restoration efforts have enhanced Türkiye's soft power, fostering goodwill and strengthening bilateral relations with host countries. By investing in the preservation of cultural heritage abroad, Türkiye demonstrates a commitment to shared history and cultural ties, which resonates positively with local governments and communities. These initiatives often serve as a foundation for broader cooperation in areas such as education, trade, and political dialogue. The restoration of the Ethem Bey Mosque in Albania, for instance, has not only preserved a cultural landmark but also reinforced diplomatic relations between Türkiye and Albania.

Media coverage has generally portrayed these projects favourably, highlighting their contributions to cultural heritage preservation and international cooperation. Local reception has been positive, with communities expressing appreciation for the restoration of culturally significant landmarks. Such projects often lead to increased community engagement and a sense of ownership over preserved sites, further embedding them into the social and cultural fabric of the region.

TİKA (Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency) plays an important role in Türkiye's foreign policy by leveraging its diverse initiatives to enhance soft power, promote humanitarian diplomacy, and strengthen cultural and diplomatic ties globally. Its restoration projects, cultural preservation efforts, and conservation programmes reflect a purpose: revitalizing Ottoman cultural heritage and fostering goodwill through foreign aid. While critics often frame Neo-Ottomanism as imperialistic and hegemonic (Aykaç, 2022; Türkeş, 2016), TİKA's activities are better understood as strategic efforts to build historical and cultural connections, particularly in regions like the Balkans, the Middle East, and Africa. Through flexible, context-specific approaches, TİKA operates as an instrument of Türkiye's evolving international relations strategy, which balances identity politics, cultural diplomacy, and foreign policy goals. Conservation of heritage is a tool for shaping international relations by emphasizing the Ottoman Empire's multicultural legacy. Restoration projects and heritage initiatives have allowed Türkiye to position itself as a bridge between East and West, while also addressing regional challenges (Al-Tikriti, 2011). Efforts like those in Iraq, Serbia and Lebanon demonstrate how Türkiye uses historical ties and shared heritage to foster mutual appreciation, economic cooperation, and transnational identity formation.

In comparison, similar restoration efforts undertaken by other nations reveal differing underlying approaches. France's activities in Africa, such as the restoration of the Lalibela heritage site in Ethiopia, and the United States' cultural preservation projects in Iraq, including the Syriac Heritage Museum, have demonstrated a commitment to safeguarding cultural heritage. However, these initiatives have at times been perceived as extensions of colonial or imperialist agendas, reflecting France's enduring colonial legacy in Africa or the United States' strategic interest in shaping Iraq's post-conflict cultural identity. Similar critiques have emerged regarding Scotland's heritage preservation projects in India, which have raised questions about cultural colonialism due to the colonial history between the two nations. While some may

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interpret TİKA's efforts through a similar lens, its initiatives are better understood as focused on the revitalization of Ottoman-era heritage and the fostering of cultural and diplomatic ties, rather than pursuing hegemonic or coercive objectives. Türkiye's approach is rooted in mutual respect and an emphasis on cultural preservation, aiming to strengthen bilateral relations and promote shared historical connections. Unlike the more unilateral narratives associated with some other international efforts, TİKA's activities reflect an inclusive strategy that avoids imposing singular interpretations of history or cultural dominance.

The role of the French Development Agency (AFD) in combining international outreach with the mobilization of French and European stakeholders has been explicitly outlined in its objectives (AFD, 2024a). France's development policy has been positioned as a contributor to its global reach and influence (AFD, 2024b). Currently, 43% of AFD's activities, excluding those in French overseas territories, are directed toward Africa, with operations spanning 54 countries and active projects in 44 (AFD, 2024c). These activities have drawn parallels to criticisms associated with the concept of "Françafrique," which describes the persistence of neo-colonial ties between France and francophone African countries. Scholars argue that, despite changes in the nature of Franco-African relations, vestiges of colonial-era dynamics continue to influence economic, political, and cultural exchanges (Gibbs, 2024). Given this context, criticisms of Türkiye's restoration initiatives appear less justified in general, especially considering the absence of any colonial background in Türkiye's historical engagement with the regions in question. While parallels may be drawn, Türkiye's efforts stem from shared historical and cultural heritage, distinguishing them from critiques tied to colonial or neo-colonial frameworks. Also, if Türkiye were to neglect the restoration of shared heritage monuments, it could equally face criticism for disregarding its historical responsibilities. Furthermore, Türkiye's initiatives are grounded in a shared cultural and historical past with the regions where these projects are implemented, a connection mostly absent in the case of nations like the U.S. or France. Consequently, critiques of Türkiye's heritage restoration efforts often appear prejudiced or misinformed, either intentionally or unintentionally misrepresenting the objectives behind such projects. By preserving shared cultural landmarks, Türkiye is not perpetuating dominance but rather fulfilling a role as a custodian of historical and cultural continuity. These initiatives have enhanced Türkiye's global reputation, solidified its position as a reliable partner, and strengthened its influence in these regions and countries. Ultimately, TİKA's activities reflect a strategy that combines cultural preservation, humanitarianism, and diplomacy to redefine Türkiye's national identity and expand its influence. By adapting its efforts to diverse contexts and global dynamics, Türkiye continues to assert itself as a beacon of cooperation and goodwill, using TİKA as a key tool to navigate contemporary geopolitical and cultural landscapes.

### Conclusion

The analysis of TİKA's heritage restoration projects from 2013 to 2023 underscores the evolving relationship between cultural preservation, foreign aid, and diplomatic engagement. These initiatives illuminate the ways in which heritage conservation can surpass traditional notions of development assistance by emphasizing shared cultural connections and historical narratives. In pursuing projects that revitalize Ottoman-era monuments, Islamic heritage sites, and other culturally significant landmarks, TİKA has demonstrated how foreign aid can simultaneously promote community development, strengthen bilateral and multilateral ties, and enhance the soft power of a donor country.

A central observation of this study is that TİKA's work in heritage restoration has functioned as a strategic instrument of cultural diplomacy. Through these efforts, Türkiye has been able to project its commitment to safeguarding not only its own legacy but also the cultural assets of recipient nations. This approach can be interpreted as a way of forging deeper

intercultural connections, particularly in regions with historical or religious links to the Ottoman Empire. The restoration of mosques, tombs, forts, and markets serves as a visible reminder of a shared past, thereby supporting the narrative of a common heritage. By preserving and revitalizing these sites, TİKA contributes to reinforcing social cohesion, stimulating local economies through tourism, and ultimately strengthening diplomatic goodwill.

Moreover, TİKA's regional focus in the Balkans, Africa, and the Middle East reflects a dual concern for both historical continuity and contemporary needs. In the Balkans, the restoration of Ottoman-era monuments illustrates how the agency navigates a complex geopolitical environment where various historical narratives intersect. Through these efforts, TİKA positions itself as a partner that respects local histories while offering resources and technical expertise for cultural preservation. Similarly, in Africa, projects that revive important Islamic heritage sites resonate with local communities for whom these places signify religious identity and social continuity. In the Middle East, many TİKA projects have targeted areas recovering from conflict or experiencing political instability, signifying that heritage restoration can also contribute to broader humanitarian objectives by fostering social unity and offering tangible economic benefits through tourism and cultural engagement.

The study also reveals the complexities surrounding TİKA's activities. While these projects generally gain positive reception among local communities, some observers question the motivations behind Türkiye's focus on sites reflective of Ottoman or Islamic identity. Critics may interpret these projects as an attempt to reassert influence or amplify a neo-imperial narrative. However, this assessment does not fully capture the layers of TİKA's work, which has expanded beyond a single historical era or cultural group. It is more constructive to see TİKA's projects as part of a broader framework of foreign aid and cultural diplomacy, wherein Türkiye aligns its historical connections with contemporary development needs in recipient countries. Moreover, such criticisms often lack context regarding the longstanding cultural ties between Türkiye and many of the host nations. Rather than imposing a new cultural imprint, the restoration of heritage sites reflects an effort to maintain a shared historical record, a step that recipients themselves often prioritize.

In comparing TİKA's heritage initiatives to those of other international agencies, a more nuanced picture of global heritage diplomacy emerges. Other nations and organizations also engage in cultural preservation abroad, yet their motivations and historical relations with host countries can differ substantially. In some instances, these projects are entangled with post-colonial legacies or broader political agendas. The trajectory of TİKA's activities, however, is shaped by Türkiye's own historical positioning, wherein shared cultural heritage serves as a primary justification for cooperation. Notably, Türkiye does not carry the same colonial history as certain other global actors, a factor that can help temper critiques of hegemonic or neo-imperial designs.

Another noticeable dimension is TİKA's evolving reporting practices. Earlier annual reports offered detailed, project-specific data on restorations, thereby facilitating close examination of project outcomes. More recent reports have adopted a more aggregated style, emphasizing overall budgetary allocations and high-level summaries. This shift poses certain challenges for scholars and policymakers seeking to evaluate the full impact of TİKA's projects, as it reduces the granularity with which outcomes can be assessed. Nonetheless, even limited data indicate that TİKA remains consistent in undertaking restoration initiatives across multiple regions and types of sites, thereby sustaining Türkiye's presence as a significant actor in the field of cultural preservation.

Overall, TİKA's experience illustrates that heritage restoration can be both a reflection of soft power ambitions and a meaningful path for foreign aid. These efforts have tangible

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community-level outcomes, from facilitating cultural tourism and economic revitalization to reinforcing collective identity and social cohesion. Moreover, TİKA's work encapsulates how a nation can leverage cultural connectivity for diplomatic advantage while simultaneously contributing to cultural heritage safeguarding in regions that value these sites as part of their own historical narratives. Despite debates over motivation and approach, the consistent pattern of collaborative restoration suggests that international heritage projects need not be exclusively self-interested or coercive; they can foster mutual benefits when shaped by local engagement, respect for community needs, and an appreciation for shared history.

Looking ahead, TİKA's trajectory offers insights for policymakers and development practitioners seeking to integrate cultural diplomacy into broader foreign aid strategies. Effective heritage restoration requires continuous dialogue with local stakeholders, clear documentation of project outcomes, and an adaptable methodology that accounts for social, political, and historical nuances. Future efforts might further emphasize inclusive approaches to selecting and managing projects, ensuring that local voices guide decision-making and that restored sites address community priorities. Such strategies would strengthen the reciprocal nature of these initiatives, fostering a sense of collective ownership and long-term sustainability. Through this holistic lens, heritage restoration transcends its architectural or aesthetic dimensions and becomes a vessel for cultural empowerment, social cohesion, and international partnership.

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