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# Turkey's State-Based Foreign Aid: Narrating "Turkey's Story"

**Senem B. Çevik**

University of California, Irvine

[scevik@uci.edu](mailto:scevik@uci.edu)

[@bsenemcevik](https://twitter.com/bsenemcevik)

## Abstract

Recognizing the potentially substantial role that public diplomacy can play in managing its global image, Turkey seeks to employ this communication tool by strengthening and/or establishing state institutions. In doing so, Turkey turns to various tools of public diplomacy with an emphasis on foreign aid. This paper situates Turkey's foreign aid within its public diplomacy framework, and tries to unpack Turkey's understanding of public diplomacy. It highlights the objectives and purposes of its public diplomacy and analyzes the internal network of state-based foreign aid. This paper argues that Turkey's state-based foreign aid is employed as a public diplomacy tool to inform domestic and foreign audiences about its generosity, thus branding the country as a benevolent country that heavily draws from its Ottoman past.

## Keywords

Public Diplomacy, Foreign Aid, Development, Turkey, Nation Brand, Image

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Turkey has turned to public diplomacy practice in efforts to manage, shape and improve its global image that is utilized for a broader agenda to create a space for Turkey in global politics. In doing to, Turkey has strengthened or established state institutions to contribute to its public diplomacy practice. Public diplomacy in Turkey is an integral tool in exerting power and it disseminates an idealized image while simultaneously serving as a tool to consolidate domestic constituency of the AKP (Justice and Development Party) by narrating what is dubbed

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<sup>1</sup> This paper heavily draws on the author's previously published work: Senem B. Çevik, Turkey's Development Aid: An Ecosystem of Conservative Grassroots and Progressive Foreign Policy (35-51), in James Pamment (Ed.), *Intersections Between Public Diplomacy & International Development: Case Studies in Converging Fields*, CPD Perspectives, Paper 2, Los Angeles: CA, Figueroa Press, 2016; Also please see the author's blogpost on University of Southern California Center on Public Diplomacy

as ‘Turkey’s story’. In that regard, public diplomacy in Turkey is interpreted as narration and publicity, geared towards a duality of audiences, both domestic and international. This style of informational public diplomacy, as exemplified by the Turkish practice, aims to counter lack of understanding and miscommunication which are broadly labeled as communication problems, thereby building on information transfer.

Foreign aid, humanitarian and developmental, is an integral strategy in Turkey’s global communication efforts, which can be labeled as public diplomacy. In doing so, Turkey bridges its nation branding efforts with development aid; and communicates those efforts to both domestic and foreign audiences. Turkey’s foreign aid efforts are grounded in its foreign policy formulation and are indispensable parts of its public diplomacy framework. As such, Turkey’s foreign aid demonstrates a functional ecosystem of multiple actors, stakeholders and benefactors that channels Turkey to its current donor state position (Çevik, 2015). In fact, in the past three years, Turkey has been acclaimed as one of the most generous donor countries, which does reflect the outcome of the ecosystem.

State institutions such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), AFAD (Disaster and Emergency Management Authority) and TİKA (Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency) are key actors in the foreign aid apparatus, with Office of Public Diplomacy (KDK), Türk Kızılayı (Turkish Red Crescent) and Diyanet (Directorate of Religious Affairs) as supporting actors. These actors, with most being reshuffled under the AKP government, provide Turkey’s state-based foreign aid apparatus. Except for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, all the other actors in the foreign aid apparatus are comprised of political appointees. The structural differences and rivalry between these institutions create an inconsistency in understanding and practicing public diplomacy. Consequently, these key public diplomacy actors not only help shape the foreign aid narrative but they are also direct outcomes of Turkey’s regional aspirations acting as components of that narrative. Thus, the state institutions partaking in public diplomacy activities shape the information structure of Turkey’s public diplomacy.

This paper looks at the informational framework employed by Turkey’s state institutions that oversee foreign aid, how these institutions work together and the challenges that arise due to structural problems. The paper sheds light on the fundamental motivations behind Turkey’s public diplomacy through foreign aid and the way in which that practice is interconnected with domestic politics, which in turn creates organizational setbacks.

This paper is composed of four sections. First, I provide an overall description of public diplomacy, focusing on the informational framework. Second, I situate Turkey’s public diplomacy within the AKP foreign policy framework to assess the

objectives of Turkey's public diplomacy and the role of public diplomacy actors. Third, I provide an outline of Turkey's organizational structure that partakes in foreign aid analyzing the state-based network. Fourth, I conclude with an analysis of how Turkey's state-based foreign aid structure narrates its story to domestic and foreign audiences as *communication of development* by simultaneously partaking in nation branding activities and providing foreign aid.

### **Public Diplomacy: Understanding the Concept**

Public diplomacy is contemporary terminology used for an old practice embodying the communication flow of state and non-state actors with foreign audiences. It is defined as 'complex communication initiatives aimed at foreign publics and governments by other governments or non-governmental organizations in pursuit of policy goals and mutual learning' (Leonard, Stead & Sweming 2002, p. 8). Scholars of communication assess public diplomacy in terms of building relationships and meaningful interactions that serve the mutual benefit of the involved parties (Zaharna 2007; Zaharna 2010). In summary, public diplomacy is a well-organized set of communication activities that has an end goal of changing external behavior while also altering one's own through mutual learning and listening (Cull 2008).

Nonetheless, public diplomacy is frequently used as a tool to aid nations in their international communication to build new narratives and craft a national image (Szondi 2008; Kaneva 2011). Therefore, countries turn to a rather traditional public diplomacy that rests on image projection and transferring information expecting to share a more desirable image. R.S. Zaharna (2009) argues that the information framework of public diplomacy stresses design and the dissemination of messages in response to communication problems and advances various political objectives. According to this understanding, communication problems are rooted in insufficient, incomplete or inaccurate information. In this regard, information is gathered, analyzed, produced and disseminated with the focus on message content as a counter strategy. Linear and direct messaging that contains ideas; knowledge or emotions are vastly conveyed through mass media. The Turkish definition of public diplomacy captures the information framework: 'Turkey has a message and story to share'. Similarly, İbrahim Kalın (2011), the first coordinator of Turkey's Office of Public Diplomacy and the current spokesman of the presidency, in an article reiterates this argument by discussing 'the new Turkey's story'. Kalın asserts that previously Turkey was unable to conduct effective public diplomacy due to problems with its image. Therefore, Turkey's public diplomacy understanding is grounded in the information framework utilizing information campaigns and nation branding.

Furthermore, Zaharna (2010) describes five key features of the information

framework as message design and delivery, control over communication, restricted or limited interaction between political sponsor and the public, channels of communication and finally measurement of information initiatives. According to this taxonomic message, design and delivery consists of the information transfer chain that entails the sender, message and the receiver. The second key feature of information framework, control, deals with the political sponsor controlling the time frame, channel and target audience of the crafted message. The messages are not only controlled and monitored but the public is also viewed as a target audience, which restrains the interaction between the political source and the audience. Nonetheless, the political source disseminates information through numerous channels such as print, audio/visual, broadcast media and electronic media. Information initiatives are utilized to achieve specific objectives such as advocating policies or enhancing image. Therefore, the political source uses measurements of information initiatives to assess the success of the strategies.

Although ideally public diplomacy should be aimed towards foreign audiences, some practices that can be categorized under public affairs are widely utilized by states to explain their narrative to domestic audiences and enhance the image that fits the foreign policy agendas. In that regard, there are studies that consider foreign aid, which comprises developmental assistance, a public diplomacy activity (Lancaster 2007; Pamment 2015). Shah and Wilkins (2004) suggest that there is a distinction between communication for development, that is communication as an act that contributes to development; and communication about development, discourses within the institutions that conduct the work. Aside from these two layers, James Pamment provides a third layer of framework, which is communication of development that covers marketing and stakeholder communication. According to Pamment (2015) communication of development brands, markets and promotes the aid activities to domestic and foreign audiences supporting the actor's image.

An overview of Turkey's state-based foreign aid structure thus provides a detailed insight on how Turkey narrates and publicizes foreign aid to brand the country towards a dual target audience. Therefore, in the next section I first discuss Turkey's objectives and purpose of conducting public diplomacy by drawing from foreign policy narrative.

### **Turkey's Public Diplomacy: Objectives and Purpose**

Turkey has been relatively more active in its foreign policy as a part of its growing economy and political ambitions in becoming a prominent actor predominantly in Muslim world. One of the ways to achieve this goal has been to look into soft power to gain access in foreign audiences and utilize public diplomacy tools such as foreign aid, international broadcasting and diaspora diplomacy to have a

broader global presence (Sancar 2015). In addition, Turkey has encountered problems pertaining to its image for quite some time, which also necessitated variety of communication methods to be employed in order to improve its global standing. Accordingly, Turkey's public diplomacy has had a dual global agenda, which consists of gaining global/regional presence and improving the country's image.

Public diplomacy in Turkey is oftentimes used as public affairs focusing on disseminating information to domestic audiences with the presumption that domestic audiences lack accurate information (MFA, interview, October 2015). In effect, public diplomacy in Turkey is rather understood and employed as a tool to share the dominant policy narratives and reiterate the nation brand in aims to consolidate the electorate (C. Haşimi, Coordinator of Office of Public Diplomacy, interview, October 2014).

As such, foreign aid and humanitarian aid have been integral to Turkey's public diplomacy in hopes to brand the country as a 'donor state' and 'benevolent country'. In doing so, Turkey's governmental and non-governmental actors are implementing this holistic vision via a network of business organizations, relief NGOs, educational partnerships, memberships in international organizations and international partnerships. Turkey's public diplomacy actors actively partake in communicating this brand and image.

Multiple factors such as relative economic progress, increased diplomatic presence, expansion of air travel routes have all contributed to and at times initiated foreign aid and increased Turkey's soft power capacity (Selçuk 2013). Nonetheless, the policies described as pan-Islamist by Özkan (2014) that are expressed in the foreign policy framework have been the driving force behind Turkey's public diplomacy structure. Kalın (2011) argues that Turkey's newly attained activism provides Turkey with the opportunity to offer new concepts and understandings in international relations. Furthermore, Kalın asserts that Turkey's soft power potential extends over the former Ottoman territories, representing the new geopolitical imagination. This articulation is represented in Ahmet Davutoğlu's foreign policy paradigm that imagines natural allies of Turkey in which Turkey is a central power (Özkan 2014, p. 127) and in which Turkey undertakes a strategic role in the global Muslim community (Murinson 2006). To illustrate, during a visit to Myanmar, Ahmet Davutoğlu, under the capacity of foreign minister, spoke about Myanmar's Arakan Muslim population: "Our trip to Myanmar and passage to Arakan will increase our visibility in ASEAN and in the globe. Turkey will reach a place where others cannot. Last year's Somalia has changed, it is not the same Somalia any more. This was achieved after our Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's trip to Somalia. Things changed there, psychology has improved in Somalia." (World Bulletin 2012, para. 12). As such, Turkish policy makers under the AKP government have argued that Turkey's foreign policy was grounded in moral

values drawing on historical responsibility frequently articulated by Davutoğlu (2012). This foreign policy discourse brands Turkey as a *regional power, center country* and *order instituting country* building on humanitarian responsibility that comprises foreign aid.

In short, Turkey's foreign policy framework required the tools to actualize, narrate and publicize this nation branding. Existing and new governmental institutions thus have been serving the purpose of dissemination information on foreign aid, while simultaneously synchronizes efforts in correcting miscommunication problems. These efforts build a close-knit organizational structure that interprets public diplomacy from an informational lens.

### **Organizational Structure: Harmony and Discord**

Turkey's public diplomacy, which is coined under the catchphrase 'Turkey has a story to share' covers the areas of Turkey's domestic progress –political and economic- and the way in which this progress is applied.<sup>2</sup> As such, state institutions partake in crafting, narrating and publicizing this story, which in turn reinforces Turkey's nation brand. Foreign aid is part and parcel of Turkey's story that necessitates a synchronized organizational structure amongst various state actors. In this section I discuss the role of key state institutions in the information public diplomacy framework and assess the harmony and disjuncture amongst them.

#### ***The Ministry of Foreign Affairs***

One of the most important but also underrepresented actor in Turkey's public diplomacy is the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) which oversees promoting Turkey's interests abroad and advocating Turkey's policies. The MFA also assists in the coordination of Turkey's public diplomacy activities abroad. Due to the importance given to cultural diplomacy the Directorate General of Information was established under the auspices of the ministry in 2011. Although public diplomacy activities are officially supposed to be directed by the Directorate General of Information, the office issues press statements and directs information campaigns in regards to Turkey's foreign policy. To illustrate, the office allocates a significant amount of its time to respond to allegations in face of crises, thus is focused on crisis communication (MFA, interview, October 2015). For that reason, Ministry of Foreign Affairs' official public diplomacy is rather informative and one-way with the aims to improve Turkey's global image through eliminating miscommunication. In addition, the Ministry places utmost importance on Turkey's cultural promotion and practices public diplomacy under the auspices of the Overseas Promotion and Cultural Affairs. In doing so, the Ministry collaborates with other

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<sup>2</sup> The Undersecretariat of Public Order and Security's publication 'Silent Revolution', an inventory of Turkey's democratic progress from 2002 and 2014 is a case in point narrating the story to both foreign and domestic audiences.



relevant institutions and organizations in its public diplomacy activities.

In respect to foreign aid, MFA promotes Turkey's efforts but its most important task is to coordinate these efforts. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs oversees emergency humanitarian aid through the Department of Humanitarian Assistance, which coordinates aid efforts with Turkish Red Crescent (Kızılay), and The Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD) as well as the embassies. In doing so, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs also coordinates its aid efforts with international organizations such as the United Nations (UN) and the World Food Program (WFP). The state-based foreign aid driven by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs does not have a communication network with non-state organizations unless non-state actors notify the ministry of their activities (MFA, interview, October 2015).

In times of emergency humanitarian assistance embassies and consulates coordinate with AFAD and Kızılay in efforts to deliver aid. For example, AFAD responded to the crisis immediately after the devastating April 2015 earthquake in Ecuador by way of the Turkish Embassy's facilitation. This facilitation involved logistical support as well as connecting AFAD with Ecuador's relief agency SETECI (Personal Interview with Turkish Embassy in Quito 2016). The embassy then became an interlocutor between Ecuador's SETECI and TIKA for furthering the cooperation efforts (SETECI, interview, August 2016). In summation, the MFA acts as a coordinating agency for foreign aid while reiterating Turkey's nation branding as a 'generous country' abroad.<sup>3</sup>

### *Office of Public Diplomacy (KDK)*

Turkish Prime Ministry Office of Public Diplomacy (KDK) is the main institution in Turkey that officially has the mandate to coordinate public diplomacy initiatives. KDK monitors and publicizes Turkey's ODA amongst both domestic and international audiences by providing statistical data. As such, KDK measures Turkey's foreign aid efforts to reiterate Turkey's role as a donor state. To illustrate, KDK has put together infographics on Turkey's foreign aid (KDK Website 2016).

More importantly, KDK has been mobilizing most of its efforts on domestic public affairs, such as promoting Turkey's foreign policy objectives and positions to the domestic audience. For example, KDK's official website includes a link under 'Facts on Rising Turkey' (KDK 2016). Thus, the KDK website not only presumes and locates Turkey as a rising power; but it also narrates the story of Turkey as a rising power. Therefore, the message disseminated by KDK is controlled and monitored to reflect the narrative of 'Turkey's story'. To illustrate, information on expansion of Turkey's foreign missions, visa free travel, new destinations with

<sup>3</sup> They Had Faith in Turkey' exhibition was curated in 2006, 'Safe Harbour Turkey' was curated in 2014, both commissioned by the MFA

Turkish Airlines, Turkish as a world language, Turkey's role in assisting in the refugee crisis are all part and parcel of the aforementioned information framework that highlights nation branding and information campaigns.

There exists a contradiction of public diplomacy as a concept and a practice within KDK that stems from a variety of issues such as Turkey's interpretation of public diplomacy, the interconnectedness of Turkey's foreign and domestic policies and the partisan structure of the institution. KDK's establishment under the AKP government poses a series of limitations in public diplomacy practice that can broadly be defined as being obliged to promote AKP's policies and narrate those policies. As a result, KDK has been used as leverage to increase the popularity of AKP and the almost cult-like personality of President Erdoğan amongst domestic constituencies while trying to raise Turkey's presence abroad. In short, KDK rather became an apparatus of populist politics in Turkey emphasizing 'Turkey as a central country' and the slogan 'World is bigger than 5'. To illustrate, catchphrases such as 'Erdoğan as a world leader', 'Erdoğan as the man of the people', 'the conqueror of Davos', 'Chief', all feed into the 'New Turkey' discourse (Selçuk, 2016) and in turn into the foreign aid and public diplomacy narrative. In summation, despite its initial goals to be an agent of communication with external audiences, KDK rather communicates foreign aid by disseminating information through numerous channels such as print, audio/visual, broadcast media and electronic media to domestic audiences.

### ***Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA)***

Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) is the key agency that delivers and communicates foreign aid. TIKA's role in both delivering and narrating foreign aid is interconnected with Turkey's foreign policy aspirations. TIKA was established in 1992 following the political vacuum in Eurasia and Central Asia created by the collapse of the Soviet Union with the objective of assisting the newly independent Turkic republics. Murinson (2006) argues that Turkey's activism followed a neo-Ottoman agenda under the Turgut Özal leadership, which has been dubbed as 'strategic depth' under the AKP leadership. In hindsight, TIKA's establishment in the early 1990s was also a manifestation of policy objectives. Nonetheless, TIKA at that time was a technical aid organization that operated under the auspices of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In 1999, TIKA was transferred to the Prime Minister's Office (TIKA Website 2016), which propelled the processes of TIKA becoming a partisan agency.

Under the AKP government TIKA has been transformed into a global aid agency in accordance with government policies. As an indirect result, TIKA is currently utilized in promoting Turkey's image both domestically and abroad. TIKA provides aid across the world and simultaneously contributes to the information



public diplomacy framework by way of communicating aid efforts. From TIKA's numerous social media accounts to its publications and news coverage the agency acts as a cornerstone of promoting Turkey's nation brand domestically.

A significant part of TIKA's aid delivery and promotion is done through TIKA's local offices, which have a certain degree of autonomy. However, as a government agency, TIKA is still represented under the embassies in accordance with diplomatic regulation, which at times creates complications in practice. In countries where TIKA does not have a local office, such as in Ecuador, coordination and cooperation processes flow slower than expected. As a result, the process of communication becomes complex and frustrating for both parties. More importantly, the pace of work then inevitably is dependent on efficient communication between parties. This also includes the issues that may rise in terms of jurisdiction. While TIKA enjoys autonomy in Turkey and its operations overseas it is still legally bound to operate under the diplomatic representation. This legal loophole creates tensions between the local TIKA office, counterpart agencies and Turkey's embassies (SETECI, AMEXID and TIKA Mexico Office, interview, August 2016)

More importantly, the tensions between bureaucratic appointments within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and political appointments within TIKA at times hamper Turkey's foreign aid efforts (Personal Interview with Turkish Embassy in Mexico City 2016; Personal Interview with TIKA Headquarters 2015). For instance, clashes between ambassadors and TIKA coordinators represent a substantial part of those existing tensions. Clashes between these representatives, can be counterproductive. On the other hand, dynamic and engaging communications between representatives are more fruitful because in that case both institutions can better coordinate their efforts. Nonetheless, TIKA's growing presence across the globe has been a marker of Turkey's public diplomacy narrative, building on the 'generous country' image and simultaneously operating as an instrument in building the nation brand.

### ***The Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD)***

The Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD) is the main authority concerned with disasters and emergencies, and works as an umbrella organization in Turkey, collaborating with other organizations (AFAD Website About Us 2016). The Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD) focuses on post-disaster rehabilitation and works as an umbrella organization overseeing emergency humanitarian relief. AFAD has responded to disasters and emergencies taking place across the globe and carried out humanitarian aid operations throughout the Arab uprisings in Libya, Tunisia, Egypt, and Syria (Sancar, 2015).

Prior to its global engagement AFAD's work –its predecessor organization- was

based on rehabilitating the areas affected by the Marmara earthquake in 1999. In 2009, the organization was reshuffled and renamed as AFAD operating under the Prime Ministry. As a result, AFAD too suffers from the same partisan structure that TIKA suffers from. AFAD's coordinator has been replaced over the years as consecutive AKP governments instituted different cabinets.

AFAD has been the leading agency in Turkey's Somalia, Myanmar and Syria aid campaigns. As such, AFAD provides aid and promotes/markets the aid through various channels of communication. In doing so, AFAD joins efforts with other government agencies in creating and reinforcing Turkey's benevolent nation brand. To illustrate, AFAD President Mehmet Halis Bilden at the Habitat III conference held in Quito, Ecuador reiterated Turkey's efforts in the Syrian humanitarian crisis by employing widely-used concepts such as 'Turkey as most generous country', 'how to build a perfect refugee camp' and 'Turkey as the World's hand of conscience' (AFAD Website 2016).

## **Conclusion**

Turkey's status as a donor state and generous country has been covered extensively in Turkish media and, to an extent, in global media. Nevertheless, Turkey's insurmountable efforts to aid Syrians fleeing the civil war and seeking refuge in Turkey have drawn interest. Global Humanitarian Assistance (GHA 2014) reports have been listing Turkey as a top donor country since 2013 and the United Nations declared Turkey as the largest refugee hosting country. Hence, Turkey does provide extensive efforts in relieving the Syrian refugee crisis and its benevolent image is predominantly defined by these efforts.

Although a significant proportion of Turkey's aid efforts go to the Syrian crisis, in this paper I focused on ways in which foreign aid is utilized as a public diplomacy tool to inform domestic and foreign audiences. In essence, public diplomacy in Turkey is interpreted as narration and publicity in which promoting Turkey overlaps with promoting government policies. Agencies, most of them reshuffled over cumulative AKP governments, are cornerstones of disseminating information in regards to foreign aid. State agencies not only narrate and brand Turkey as a generous country via sharing 'Turkey's story', but at the same time they actively partake in delivering aid. As a result, state agencies are both actors and narrators of Turkey's nation brand towards a dual audience, domestic and foreign. In doing so, Turkey aims to expand its sphere of influence predominantly amongst other Muslim countries, correct miscommunication and consolidate the domestic electorate base of AKP by utilizing rhetoric that borrows from a selective interpretation of Ottoman history. Hence, there are multiple motivations that factor in Turkey's communication with publics. Overall, with the aims to disseminate information, Turkey's public diplomacy practice fits the information framework

that provides a functional degree of coordination amongst state agencies.

The harmony amongst state agencies in delivering and promoting aid is crucial in reiterating Turkey's story. Although organizational harmony is critical, the structures of state institutions have direct influence on the efficiency of foreign aid as public diplomacy, thus creating a discord at times. Except for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the cornerstones of foreign aid TIKA and AFAD both function under the Prime Ministry. As a result, these offices are far more affected by party politics. The challenges, thus, stem from public diplomacy practice being linked to domestic politics. Nonetheless, broader political agendas help create Turkey's nation brand as a donor country and narrate the brand to a duality of audiences.

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### **Bio**

Senem B. Çevik, PhD is a lecturer at University of California Irvine (UCI) Program in International Studies and Tobis Fellow at UCI's Center on Ethics and Morality. She has taught at Ankara University and Atılım University prior to joining UC Irvine. She is a fellow with the International Dialogue Initiative (IDI) and also serves on the committee of the Turkey-Israel Civil Society Forum (TICSF). She is a blogger for University of Southern California Center on Public Diplomacy and 2015-2016 Contributing Scholar. She is the co-editor with Philip Seib of *Turkey's Public Diplomacy* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2015). Her current research focuses on grassroots diplomacy in peace-building and humanitarian aid.

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