



PERSPECTIVES

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The Turkish Love-Hate Relationship with America

by Burak Bekdil

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: About the same proportion of Turks view the US (72%) and ISIS (73%) as a threat to their country. That's weird. Erdoğan's generation of Islamists were anti-American largely because of the Arab-Israeli dispute – although they feared Soviet communism more than American imperialism. Future generations of Turkish Islamists will hate America even more because they will have gone through long years of anti-American indoctrination by a beloved leader and his powerful propaganda machine.

Turks often expose degrees of confusion when asked about their foreign policy preferences. A public opinion poll in the mid-2000s found that most Turks viewed the US as a threat to world security – but the same poll found that Turks expected the US, before every other ally, to come to Turkey's help if needed.

Conspiracy theories have always been abundant in the Turkish psyche. Schoolchildren grow up hearing maxims like "A Turk's only friend is another Turk" and "Our Ottoman ancestors had to fight seven worlds (the big powers)." According to this worldview, the world's major powers construct intricate conspiracies as they tirelessly plot to stop Turkey's rise.

In an age of rising populism, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has systematically fueled the common thinking that "the entire world is conspiring against us." His Islamist, anti-western, isolationist narrative is creating a vicious circle that threatens to take Turkey's foreign policy calculus hostage – not only today, but well into the future.

Until Erdoğan came to power in November 2002, most Turks would not have known or even been interested in the names of their foreign ministers. In the 1990s, I saw a group of party supporters clamor to kick the then foreign minister out of a party meeting, mistaking him for a journalist.

Erdoğan's ambitious neo-Ottoman ideology introduced foreign policy into Turks' daily lives. Coffeehouse talk changed from standard ruminations on inflation, joblessness, economic hardships, and football to pontifications about the Arab-Israeli dispute, the Arab Spring, the Syrian civil war, America, the EU, and Russia.

Two different surveys in 2011, conducted just after Erdoğan's party had won 49.5% of the national vote in a general election, found the following:

- 75% of Turks thought problematic relations between Islamic countries and the West were the West's fault
- 53% blamed poverty in Muslim countries on the West and America
- 82% had a negative opinion about Christians
- only 9% believed Arab groups had carried out the 9/11 attacks
- 41% thought the most violent religion in the world is Judaism
- 65% said they approved of Erdoğan's foreign policy

In August, the Washington-based Pew Research Center's global survey found that 72% of Turks saw America as a threat to their country's security. In Turkey, a NATO member state, the US is perceived as a greater threat than Russia or China. "America's influence is a top concern in Turkey," the survey read. "This figure [72%] is up 28 percentage points since 2013, when just 44% named US power and influence as a major threat."

Bizarrely, similar numbers of Turks view the US and ISIS as a threat to their country. Pew did not ask Turks about their perceptions of ISIS this year, but its 2015 research found that 73% of Turks had a negative opinion of ISIS and 72% had a negative opinion of America. (In that poll, 8% of Turks had a favorable opinion of ISIS while 19% had no opinion.)

The explanations for anti-Americanism vary in different countries. For instance, in Greece, the sentiment is a largely historical phenomenon, as many blame the violent Greek civil war on the US. In Turkey, it has a different nature. As Turkish society becomes more and more ethnically and religiously conservative and xenophobic, anti-American thinking gains ground and spreads to more segments of the society. Erdoğan's populist rhetoric only makes things worse.

“It [the presumed American hostility toward Turkey] is because we are Muslim,” a schoolteacher explained to me when I asked her why she thought America was conspiring against Turkey. Her husband, a government banker, broadened the issue: “Also because we [Turkey] stand against the Jewish oppression of the Palestinians ... America doesn’t like this.”

Such theories, pumped up by Erdoğan and his powerful media machinery, are quite palatable to the conservative masses, making this kind of manipulation a winning game for Erdoğan. The more Turks feel “imperial” again – the more they believe they have a strong leader and government at long last – the more votes Erdoğan can garner.

In this game, Erdoğan has to show that he really cares about “my nation’s foreign policy preferences” – a concern he does in fact share. The deal he offers is to make voters feel proud again in exchange for their support. All Erdoğan has to do is give the impression that he is fighting the world powers, America included. He then tells the world powers in private that they should ignore his rhetoric, which is only for domestic consumption.

“Still, since taking power in Ankara in 2002, Erdoğan’s Justice and Development Party (AKP) has mainstreamed anti-Americanism,” wrote Soner Cagaptay, director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute.

Erdoğan’s generation of Islamists was anti-American largely because of the Arab-Israeli dispute, although they feared Soviet communism more than American imperialism. Future generations of Turkish Islamists will hate America even more because they will have gone through long years of indoctrination by a beloved leader and his powerful propaganda machine.

One of the schoolboys who today admires the “great leader” and his brave fight against “the Satan” will one day become his country’s foreign minister, prime minister, or president.

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