



PERSPECTIVES

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Confused Turkey: Westward Ho All Over Again?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Turkey, which has labeled onion traders terrorists, blames the Kurds for the turmoil in America, and encourages its own intelligence agency to kill Turkish journalists abroad who are critical of the regime, never ceases to amaze. The latest survey reveals that Turks consider America both the greatest threat to Turkey and the second-best choice as a foreign policy partner.

In 2018, the Turkish police began to raid onion wholesalers on suspicion that they were artificially raising onion prices and trying to “illegally overthrow” the government of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Pro-government [headlines](#) included “Police find onions in onion storehouse,” which in America would be a headline from *The Onion*. At around the same time, Erdoğan claimed the US was plotting to economically damage Turkey just as his government [signed](#) a deal with US management consultant McKinsey to help Ankara implement a new medium-term economic program.

Back in 2014, the president caused loud laughter when he [claimed](#) that Muslim sailors had reached the American continent in 1178 (314 years before Columbus) and that Columbus said in his memoirs that he had seen a mosque atop a hill on the coast of Cuba. Not much has changed since then. In June 2020, *Sabah*, a fiercely pro-Erdoğan daily, [claimed](#) that an ancient site in Thessaloniki, Greece, built 300 years before Muhammad, was a mosque.

One of Erdoğan’s deputies, Ali Ihsan Yavuz, [became](#) the joke of the year after he and party officials failed to prove their allegations of election fraud when they lost Istanbul to an opposition candidate in 2019. “Even if nothing [illegal] happened,” he said, “something happened.”

Before the same round of municipal elections in March 2019, a district mayor from Erdoğan's party [said](#): "If we lose Esenyurt [district elections] we will lose Islam; we will lose Mecca and Jerusalem."

When Erdoğan [vetoed](#) a bill that postponed the installation of filters in thermal power plants, headlines read: "President Erdoğan vetoes Party Chairman Erdoğan's bill." The bill vetoed by Erdoğan had been proposed by Erdoğan.

In May of this year, Turkish authorities [detained](#) an Iranian tourist for hanging a towel emblazoned with the British Union Jack from a building during a public holiday. Locals complained that the display of the towel was a provocative act. According to the accused, he was simply drying a wet towel.

A mayor from Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party decided to erect a statue in his city of 13th century Ottoman leader Ertuğrul Ghazi. Unfortunately, the statue [turned out](#) to look not like the Ottoman sultan, but like the actor who played him in the TV series "Resurrection Ertuğrul" aired by the state broadcaster.

In a telephone conversation with US President Donald Trump, Erdoğan [told](#) him the Kurds were the masterminds behind the ongoing political turmoil in America. That's a more realistic theory than the one once [proposed](#) by Erdoğan's chief advisor, Yiğit Bulut, who claimed that anti-government protests in 2013 were the result of a telekinetic attack by dark forces.

There is a much uglier side to Turkish nonsense. In June, commentators on a pro-Erdoğan TV channel called on Turkey's intelligence service to assassinate Turkish journalists living abroad. "No need to beat around the bush anymore. Where they live is known ... Let's see what happens if several of them are exterminated. How terrified they would be if you put a bullet to the heads of some journalists," commentator Cem Küçük [said](#), with special reference to Turkish journalist Abdullah Bozkurt, director of *Nordic Monitor* and a fellow at *Middle East Forum*.

It is perhaps not surprising that with all that insanity swirling around them, Turks are confused about how their country's foreign policy should be conducted.

A survey by Istanbul's Kadir Has University [found](#) that the Turkish mindset about their national identity is split into almost equal thirds: Turkey is an Islamic country, it is a European country, and it is unique. The Turks who see their country as an Islamic nation made up 56.3% in 2018, 32.9% in 2019, and 22.4% in 2020, a sharp decline of nearly 34 percentage points within only two

years. In 2020, 21.5% said Turkey was a European country and 27.4% said it was *sui generis*, with no connection to any other identity.

Regardless of their perception of their identity, 51.5% of Turks support Turkey's membership in the EU and 55.2% think Turkey's NATO membership should continue. In line with that thinking, the percentage of Turks who see Russia as a strategic partner dropped from 55.8% in 2019 to 37%.

Those numbers look consistent, but there is confusion there too. Seventy percent of Turks think the biggest threat to their country is the US, down from 81.3% in 2019. But when asked with which country or countries Turkey should cooperate in foreign policy, 27% said the US, the second-biggest group after "Turkic countries in Central Asia" (30.2%). In other words, the second-largest group of respondents said they think Ankara should cooperate in foreign policy with the country that is the biggest threat to Turkey.

This perception of the US reflects a Turkish blend of hatred and pragmatism: America is Satan, but we should not upset this powerful enemy. It's a loveless, if not hateful, marriage. Similarly, most Turks view the EU as a hostile Christian club but support Turkey's membership for the sake of economic benefit.

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