

## Analysis

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**Summary:** Turkey's hybrid Western/Muslim character is reflected in its relationship with the United States. The Turkish public resents the United States' foreign policies and perceived "meddling" in Turkey's neighborhood. At the same time, the Turkish government is quick to bask in any attention or preferential treatment by the U.S. government.

## The Double Souls of Turkey and its Impact on Turkish-U.S. Relations

by *Ahmet K. Han*

Turkey has a uniquely hybrid identity. It is a state with long established relations and a historical footing in Europe. Turkey has gained a place in "Western" institutions not only, but especially, by virtue of its NATO membership. It also is a country with a predominantly Muslim population and, through that identity and history, it sustains ties with the Middle East. The way Turkey interprets the domestic and international dynamics and the choices the country is taking are being forged under the pressures and tensions created by the interplay of these two identities. The clashes of Turkey's double identities remind one of the two faces of Janus.

This position, while allowing for the advantages of Janusian thinking, also creates the troubles of potentially deeply split identities, making it hard to predict the country's actions. As such, more often than not, understanding its perceptions, reactions, and choices has become problematic. Turkey's interaction with the United States illustrates this.

The Turkish version of resentment toward the United States, endemic since the U.S. intervention in Iraq, has a distinct character going beyond actual negative historical encounters.

These included the "other missiles of October" of the Cuban missile crisis — where the United States, as part of a grand bargain with the U.S.S.R., withdrew the Jupiter nuclear missiles it had deployed in Turkey — to the "hood event" of 2003 — a crisis that occurred when a Turkish special operations team was apprehended and lead away with hoods over their heads by U.S. troops in Sulaimaniya, Northern Iraq. Its distinct character combines angst and exasperation that is based in Turkey's Ottoman past and a certain form of Turkish exceptionalism. As such, it is different from the resentment of the West and the United States prevalent in the Arab and Muslim world, in that it is not largely characterized by anti-imperialism or religious radicalism. Turks from different ends of the political spectrum are unified by their ire against the presence of other "order setters" within what they identify as *their* historical neighborhood. This is partly reflected in the opinion polls. Turks by and large show comparably little leniency for China either, and arguably Russia, too.

Turks who see the United States as a constant creator of discord in their domestic politics and on foreign policy can be found in all domestic



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political circles. Any domestic development that goes against the supported political movement is said to have U.S. backing, which creates disenfranchisement. The United States is seen as the ultimate instigator, having a hand in everything, albeit a clumsy one. It is perceived as weak in its assessments and in its understanding of Turkey and its neighborhood. In this context, the conspiracy theories are easily spread. Criticizing U.S. policies is an easy way to score points with the public, whether or not the charges are accurate.

On the other hand, it has historically been important for Turkish leaders to receive votes of confidence from their U.S. counterparts. U.S. approval provides political capital and economic credibility for a leader and the economic agenda he or she represents, especially at the elite level. In the mainstream media, it is usually portrayed as a sign that “the country is on track” and that the leaders in questions are globally “respected.” Apparently the level of endorsement of this narrative varies with the audience’s level of support for, and identification with, the domestic political actor in question. Nevertheless, it can be argued that this attitude cuts across political preferences, time, and ideological positions. Interestingly, however, this does not necessarily translate into more sympathy for the United States. Frequently, the audience(s) in question remains deeply cynical about the United States.

This dynamic has become even more interesting to watch during the last decade particularly following the Arab Spring. This is in part due to the transformation of Turkey’s self-concept in line with the worldview of its ruling elites. Objective assessments and rational calculations regarding relations and issues, based on recognition of the United States’ and Turkey’s respective priorities, became even more challenging for both parties. It should be noted that Turkish attitudes are, perhaps because of their loathed “lesser power status,” more “confused,” which is reflected in the way Turkish media covers diplomatic exchanges. Considering the prerogatives the United States has in Turkey’s external relations, the extensive attention of Turkish press might be understandable. However, the media coverage of bilateral meetings such as the Turkish prime minister’s visit to the United States is, by any standard, highly exaggerated.

Even at the elite level, Turkey has a love/hate relationship with the United States. It demands to be treated as equal

with the United States on the international stage, and it perceives positive gestures from the United States as a confirmation of its global standing. It is hard to miss the somewhat problematic nature of this perspective.

On the U.S. side, the over-reliance on global validation and the exclusivity of a peculiarly Western definition of rationality, as well as the over-confidence in the transformative power of such rationally designed frameworks, seem to be parts of a problem that goes beyond differences in interests and material capabilities. This tendency is deeply rooted in U.S. pragmatism. Predictably, the different social structures, attitudes, and systems established through varied historical experiences and cultural settings do not necessarily respond well to these meticulously engineered frameworks. The understanding of rationality; the prioritization of needs, interests, and values; and the way these influence the decision-making processes differ across cultures. This is one reason why U.S. efforts designed in a distinctly “American way,” which “should normally work,” hit cultural walls. Under-rating or categorically rejecting alternative understandings of rationality or cultural and historical limits to social engineering generates animosity and misunderstanding. Turkey is no exception.

During the Cold War, political necessities sustained relations between the two allies — especially at the elite level. However, this has been largely not reflected at the public level. During the last decade, the changing character of the international system has provided a strategic depth for regional powers. In Turkey’s case, this was compounded by strong economic performance. The relatively weakened credibility of the United States in the Middle East and the divergence of interests stemming from structural changes and the transformation of Turkey’s traditional conception of

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its role to match the ruling AKP's worldview has dictated an adjustment in relations. The two countries are still struggling to find the new balance.

Even though it has lost considerable leverage, the United States is still the global heavyweight. Turkey, a NATO member, neither represents overarching influence on all issues, nor does it have limitless capabilities and resources for soft and hard power. As such, it is unable to dictate the United States' choice of alignment. Syria is an excellent case in point. The conflict there demonstrates that Turkey's relative power position in the international and regional systems, although undoubtedly improved, remains a constraint on its aspirations for independent action and depth of influence. As such, Turkey requires U.S. support on material, diplomatic, and even ideational levels. On the other hand, it is still important for the United States to have a *rational* proactive ally in the region. However, this proactivism should not be stained with an over-zealous ambition that leads to a chronic delivery deficit.

The post-Arab Spring environment has clearly underlined that the two countries still need each other, so the parameters of the adjustment of U.S.-Turkish relations have to be carefully and systematically defined. But the level of change in material conditions is still far from dictating a total shift from the frameworks of the past — particularly one that is drastically in Turkey's favor.

Today, Turkish public opinion is largely not supportive of the United States' policies. The Turkish government is unlikely to succeed in changing this perception, since it is suffering from all the paradoxes outlined above, despite their realization of the need for the U.S. support of the developments they advocate.

The most curious development marking the last decade of Turkish-U.S. relations is the fact that the ties that have been defined by transatlantic associations and institutions (most notably NATO) during the better part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, are increasingly being defined by the events and turmoil of the Middle East. The recent downturn of Turkey's foreign policy fortunes is clear evidence of the unsustainability of the country's current position in the Middle East. Therefore, any relationship readjustment should include an element

of the renewal of transatlanticism. If the parties fail to enact this renewal, the controversy regarding Turkey's "shift of axis" will be worth debating, as it potentially denotes a new geostrategic positioning and role for Turkey.

### About the Author

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