

**Summary:** While Turkish public opinion toward the United States and the Obama administration has improved since last year, the attitudes of the Turkish population have generally been unfavorable toward the United States for the last decade or so. Before the new millennium, however, Turks had a favorable opinion of the United States. What changed? Only when we examine U.S.-Turkish alliance relations from their beginnings in 1946 until today can we understand why Turkish public opinion was favorable for a long time and then changed for the worse recently. This brief examines that history.

## Turkish-U.S. Relations: Beautiful Life but Ugly Policy

by Ersin Kalaycıoğlu

The German Marshall Fund's 2011 *Transatlantic Trends* survey shows that Turkish public opinion toward the United States and the Obama administration has improved since last year. More specifically, the survey found that "... The plurality of Turks (34 percent) described current relations between the United States and Turkey as bad, with 28 percent saying ties were mixed and 27 percent saying they were good. Among Turks, 62 percent had an unfavorable opinion of the United States. But the intensity of that anti-Americanism has subsided somewhat. This year, 38 percent of Turks had a *very* unfavorable opinion of the United States, an 11 percentage point drop since 2010."<sup>1</sup> Why have the attitudes of the Turkish population been unfavorable toward the United States for the last decade or so, while it had been more favorable earlier?

### **Cold War Alliance: From Strategic Partners to Cantankerous Allies**

Only when we examine the U.S.-Turkish alliance relations from its beginning in 1946 until today can we understand why Turkish public opinion was favorable for a long time and then changed for the worse

recently. A long-term perspective on U.S.-Turkish relations helps us to differentiate what has continued more or less the same and what has varied over time in the eyes of the Turkish population in U.S.-Turkish relations.

When the Turkish ambassador to the United States, Münir Erteğün, passed away in 1944, his body could not be brought back to Turkey because of the war. In 1946, the USS Missouri brought his body back to Istanbul. The ship was welcomed with jubilation and popularly perceived as a show of the U.S. support for Turkey against the threatening Soviet Union next door. The Russian émigrés of the 1910s, who had fled to Istanbul in large numbers during the Bolshevik Revolution, had ushered in new tastes, and among them was a vegetable salad, which was called the "Russian salad"; this was almost instantly converted to "American salad" in the delicatensens of Istanbul in 1946. When President Truman declared in his famous Doctrine in 1947 that the United States would be protecting the freedoms of the Greek and Turkish people, the overall attitude in Turkey toward the extended U.S. nuclear protection was one of gratitude. Turkey began to receive Marshall Aid in 1948, which boosted the image of the United States

<sup>1</sup> <http://trends.gmfus.org>



## Analysis

and many of its products, and their brand names, from Ford and GMC to Gillette, became even more entrenched. They have survived the ups and downs of U.S.-Turkish relations since that time.

It was under those conditions that Turkey sent a division to the United Nations forces in the Korean War and showed a determined military stance against the Chinese advances. With the Korean War, Turkey became a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1952, and throughout the 1950s, Turkey followed very close relations with the United States and NATO. But such a symbiotic relationship between a superpower and a developing country could not have survived ups and downs of the Cold War, and it did not.

The crisis between Turkey and Greece over the status and ethnic relations on Cyprus were briefly resolved with the establishment of the Republic of Cyprus under the guarantorship of Turkey, Greece, and Britain in 1960. However, ethnic tensions between the Greek and Turkish Cypriot elites flared up again soon after, and Turkey responded to what it considered the ethnic cleansing of Turkish Cypriots with a military intervention on the island in 1964. In a not-so-diplomatic letter written by U.S. President Lyndon Johnson to Turkish Prime Minister İsmet İnönü, Johnson argued that the weapons used by Turkey in this intervention were U.S. weapons assigned to Turkish troops functioning as NATO troops, which required Congressional authorization for use. When that letter was leaked to the press, the socialist politicians and the press argued that there was more to it than just the letter. During the Cuban missile crisis of 1962, there was a nuclear quid pro quo involving Cuba and Turkey between the United States and the Soviet Union. From that point onward, Turkish public opinion toward the United States began to change course and gain increasing complexity.

### **Turkish-U.S. Relations on the Roller Coaster**

The Turkish left began to define U.S.-Turkish relations as colonial, while the right wing perceived the United States as the bulwark of support against the communist threat. When the Turkish government decided to intervene to restore the *status quo ante* on Cyprus after a Greek military coup in 1974, U.S.-Turkish relations again came under stress. In 1975, the U.S. Congress imposed an arms embargo on Turkey. This embargo was eventually lifted in 1978,

but U.S.-Turkish relations began to improve only after the 1980 Turkish military coup. The military and the civilian governments under Prime Minister Turgut Özal had no major difficulty with the United States, as Turkey moved to adopt the liberal market economy policies of the Thatcher and Reagan administrations. However, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the Gulf War of 1990, the breakup of Yugoslavia, and the Azeri-Armenian war over Nagorno-Karabagh created new difficulties for Turkey. The end of control of Saddam Hussein's regime in the north of Iraq resulted in increased effectiveness of the anti-Turkish activities of the Kurdish nationalist PKK organization. The Turkish masses eventually began to question the *raison d'être* of the no-fly zone, on one hand, and of the American motives toward the Kurdish nationalists, on the other. However, the real downturn in the U.S.-Turkish relations occurred after the invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Turkey supported the U.S. military campaign against the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. When President Bush mentioned a crusade against terror after 9/11, many conservatives in Turkey, whose numbers had swelled with the domestic and international downfall of socialism and upsurge of identity-based multicultural thinking, began to register doubts about the U.S. motives. The invasion of Iraq in 2003 created even more concerns. First, U.S. and the Turkish armed forces mismanaged their negotiations for a joint intervention in Iraq. Second, the Turkish military began to speculate that the real motive of the U.S. intervention in Iraq was to deploy 65,000 troops in the southeastern region of Turkey and eventually occupy the north of Iraq, nullify the Turkish-Iraqi border, and establish a Kurdish nation-state. Third, a vote in the Turkish Grand National Assembly (TBMM) failed to authorize the Turkish and U.S. troops for a cross-border intervention in Iraq, in spite of the fact that the ruling AKP government had a huge majority in the parliament and had showed signs of agreement with the Bush administration before the vote. The last straw was the news of the arrest of the members of the Turkish Special Forces in Sulaymaniyah, Iraq, who were hauled to Baghdad with their heads covered with hoods. The "hood incident" was the final evidence that convinced Turkish voters across the ideological spectrum that the United States was now becoming hostile toward Turkey. Eyewitness statements by retired Turkish generals regarding U.S. troops assisting the PKK further reinforced the enmity of the United States toward Turkey in the eyes of the Turkish populace.



## Analysis

Then came the election of U.S. President Barak Obama in 2008. A president whose middle name is Hussein, the same as that of the grandson of the Prophet Mohammed, was welcomed as a shift to a new, sophisticated, and positive change in U.S. foreign policy toward Muslims. Turkish adults seemed to have high expectations of President Obama after his famous Cairo, Egypt, lecture in 2009. However, as the difficulties occurred in closing down the Guantanamo Bay prison, constraining the Israeli government in the Cast Led operation in Gaza in 2008, and influencing the PM Netanyahu government to stop new Jewish settlements in the West Bank, the initial high expectations dropped. Yet, small but systematic shifts in public opinion showed the “Obama effect” in the 2009 and 2010 *Transatlantic Trends* surveys in Turkey. Since there has been no major issue with the United States since 2008, there has been a further drop among those who are highly *unfavorably* predisposed toward the United States in Turkey.

### Conjectures: Clash of the Foreign Policies

The left-right divide in Turkey over the contrasting images of the United States — the imperialist superpower versus the defender of religious and other freedoms — perished by the summer of 2003. A huge majority of the Turkish population began to perceive the United States as undertaking the re-making of the Middle East based on its own desires and interests.

However, readers need to be cautioned that although opinion polls showed sky-high anti-Americanism in Turkey, they seem to miss the point that the responses given by the Turkish interviewees did not take into consideration the concurrent increasing consumption of American way of life in the Turkish culture. For example, Coke and Pepsi have become *the* party drinks, substituting for wine and raki, in the conservative cocktails in Turkey. Cola sales in Turkey increase during the holy month of Ramadan, when millions seem to be breaking their fast by drinking some kind of fizzy drink. Jeans are worn by the millions, while such U.S. brand names as McDonalds, Kentucky Fried Chicken, Burger King, and Starbucks have a highly conspicuous presence in every major Turkish town. Mall shopping has become a staple of the consumer society that Turkey has become since the 1990s. Hollywood films continue to attract large crowds, and so do the iPhones and iPads, as well as the American NBA and music stars who fill stadiums when they perform in Turkey. Chevrolet is making a major

comeback in the Turkish automotive market. The “American salad” has been in vogue in the delicatessens of the country since 1946. The message of the Turkish population seems to be that the American way of life is beautiful, but that U.S. foreign policy is ugly.

### About the Author

Dr. Ersin Kalaycıoğlu is a full professor of political science at Sabancı University Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. He co-edited *Turkey: Political, Social and Economic Challenges in the 1990s*, authored *Turkish Dynamics: A Bridge Across Troubled Lands*, co-authored *Turkish Democracy Today: Elections, Protest and Stability in an Islamic Society* and *Rising Tide of Conservatism in Turkey* with Ali Carkoglu of Sabancı University, as well as editing and writing other publications in Turkish. Currently, Prof. Kalaycıoğlu is carrying out studies of socio-political orientations and attitudes toward politics and voting behavior in Turkey in collaboration with Ali Carkoglu of Koç University, Istanbul, Turkey, and conducting annual national social surveys as part of the International Social Survey Program.

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## Analysis