

## Analysis

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**Summary:** Turkish voters, just like voters anywhere, are inclined to vote their ideologies and pocket books during national elections. If we look more closely, it is possible to see that several foreign policy issues have left indelible marks on the minds of Turkish voters and political elites alike. Several issues have been successfully converted into domestic issues, which helped to bolster or undermine the ideological positions of both politicians and parties, which in turn has a major impact on what people decide at the polls.

## Turkish Foreign Relations and Public Opinion

by *Ersin Kalaycıoğlu*

Turkish voters, just like voters anywhere, are inclined to vote their ideologies and pocket books during national elections. Research indicates that the foreign relations of the country fail to attract voters' attention; foreign policy or international issues seem to have no direct significant impact on the party preferences of the voters in Turkey. In fact, foreign relations or issues also do not seem to constitute one of the perceived major problems of the country by the public at any time, whether during elections or not. However, research also shows that, when probed, large numbers of respondents have opinions on foreign policy issues, including positive or negative attitudes toward neighboring countries, allies, and major powers of the world. If we look more closely, it is possible to see that several foreign policy issues have left indelible marks on the minds of Turkish voters and political elites alike. Several issues have been successfully converted into domestic issues, which helped to bolster or undermine the ideological positions of both politicians and parties, which in turn has a major impact on what people decide at the polls.

### Foreign Policy meets Domestic Politics

Turkish Prime Minister R. Tayyip Erdoğan recently stated that “we do not see Syria as a foreign problem, but as a domestic problem. Because we have 850 kilometers of common border, we are linked through lineage, history, and culture. Therefore, what goes on there would not permit us just to be a spectator. On the contrary, we need to hear those voices, and naturally do what is necessary.”<sup>1</sup> Very similar statements could have been made in the past about the civil war in Bosnia in the 1990s, Iraq in the 2000s, Gaza in 2008, and Somalia right now, which Erdoğan visited on August 19, 2011, with a large entourage to deliver aid to the famine-stricken country.

All of those issues have been converted with sophisticated political acumen into the solidarity of the Turkish people (Muslims) with the suffering Muslim peoples abroad. The reactions of the Turkish government, and in particular of the prime minister, from the Davos “one minute” intervention to the unprecedented leniency showed by the agents of the government toward a pro-Islamist NGO called IHH, the

<sup>1</sup> (see <http://www.voanews.com/turkish/news/Erdogan-Suriye-ic-meselemiz-Geregini-Yapmak-Durumundayiz-127078293.html>)



overall governmental attitude toward the Mavi Marmara incident from its beginning to the end, and the reactions to the leaked Palmer Report of the UN in September 2011, also play to the hearts of the voters at home. Erdoğan's reference to Israel on September 6, 2011, as "the spoilt boy of the UN" is a prime example of how he is a superb communicator and touches the hearts of so many coffee and tea house-goers in Turkey, who then loyally support him at the polls. The ideological spin of the conservative politicians is so effective in tying those foreign issues to religious sentiments and to the Ottoman Empire (where the ancestors of most of these peoples had shared the same political rule with the citizens of Turkey today) that large swaths of the population were mobilized for political action or raising charitable donations.

Rendering foreign issues as part and parcel of domestic politics does not seem to be monopolized by the conservative politicians in Turkey either. In fact, it was the Cyprus issue of the 1960s, which resulted in threatened Turkish military intervention on that island in accordance with the guarantor status recognized in international law, that precipitated an international conflict between Turkey and Greece, both NATO allies, at the height of Cold War. U.S. President Lyndon B. Johnson felt the need to intervene and wrote a not-so-diplomatic letter to Turkish Prime Minister İsmet İnönü, reminding him that all of the Turkish military was assigned to NATO and had been armed by the weapons donated and sold by the United States, requiring Turkey to get the permission of the U.S. Congress to use

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those weapons in military operations. When the contents of the letter were revealed in 1965 by the socialist Turkish Workers Party (TIP) at the National Assembly, it was as if a bomb dropped on the entire country. The socialists argued with dexterity that under the circumstances, Turkey was no different than a colony of the United States. Under the leadership of left-wing politicians, a strong anti-American and anti-NATO campaign began immediately. However, the conservative masses and politicians considered themselves engaged in an existential struggle against the atheist Soviets and their agents at the height of the Cold War. Being relatively smaller than the right, the left-wingers did not seem to create a major concern for Turkish foreign policymakers in their relations with the United States or NATO. Nevertheless, it is a matter of fact that Turkish foreign policy took a sudden shift away from its previous one-track and pro-NATO solidarity toward attempting to establish multifarious relations with the Middle East and even with the Soviet bloc countries. Ironically, it was the most pro-American politician of the time, Prime Minister Süleyman Demirel, who flew to Moscow soon after he was elected in 1965 to rekindle economic and cultural relations with the Soviet Union. President Johnson's letter seemed to have precipitated a dramatic change in Turkish foreign policy toward multifaceted foreign relations and independence from the United States and the NATO alliance, on one hand, and establishment of a national defense industry and a non-NATO fourth army in the Western part (Aegean region) of the country, on the other.

Interestingly enough, it was the invasion of Iraq by the United States and the Coalition of the Willing in 2003 that seemed to have created an almost national consensus over anti-Americanism in Turkey. When it was reported in the Turkish media that a team of Turkish special forces were apprehended by U.S. troops in the north of Iraq and taken to Baghdad for interrogation, with their heads covered with hoods throughout their journey, the attitudes of the conservative masses in Turkey also shifted dramatically to correspond with those of the left-leaning voters against the United States. The United States emerged as the enemy of not only the left-wing minority, but also of Muslims throughout the world including in Turkey, since this incident. The exceptional treatment by U.S. troops of the Kurdish nationalist terror network, the PKK, which kept its safe haven in northern Iraq, also bolstered the adversarial image of the United States in the minds of the Turkish



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masses, military, and political elites. Every time the PKK attacked Turkish security forces, the threatening popular image of the United States in Turkey has been reinforced.

More Turkish voters started to perceive Turkish foreign relations from the prism of Islamic solidarity as the country came under increasing grip of a conservative mindset since the end of the Cold War. Conservative Turkish voters have considered Muslims as the oppressed, and the United States and its European and Israeli allies as the oppressors. Accordingly, Israel's Cast Led Operation of 2008 – 2009 was perceived as an example of outrageous usage of brutal force over the fellow Muslim civilians in Gaza. This mood was quickly used to mobilize popular support by all of the conservative and religious parties, including the ruling AKP.

One year later, the passive and non-committal attitude of the Turkish government led to the initiative to pierce through what was defined as an immoral and illegal Israeli blockade and the Mavi Marmara incident where nine Turkish citizens were killed by Israeli defense forces. Turkish – Israeli relations have suffered dearly from the management of the situation by both governments, yet the credentials of the AKP leadership as the champion of rights of the downtrodden Muslims have become ever more strongly established both at home and abroad. However, it would be an overstatement to argue that the AKP was alone in promoting a conservative Muslim image in the country. Several political parties tried to benefit from that frame of mind, yet none has been as successful in making it a major public relations success as the AKP, which seems to have contributed to its popularity at the polls as well.

### Conclusion

Foreign policy, relations, and issues provide important opportunities for Turkish politicians and their parties to bolster their ideological images in domestic politics. There is scant evidence that foreign relations have any impact on voting behavior or any other form of political participation in the country. However, there are many examples of how political leaders and parties who successfully manage to take a stance on the foreign policy or international issues that touch a popular nerve reinforce their political acumen, credibility, and ideological image. This in turn seems to improve their chances of being supported at the polls. Current times are such that championing the causes of the Muslim masses in Turkey, Europe, or the Middle East, and

confronting and challenging the leaders of powerful non-Muslim countries on those grounds, contribute to an image of political strength and attract a lot of political capital at home and abroad. This seems not to hurt but help such politicians and their parties at the polls in Turkey.

### About the Author

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