

Analysis

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Summary: Despite their diversity, Turks have a common characteristic: thinking that Turkey has no friends and that every other country in the world is a potential enemy. The Turkish political culture and education system have reproduced this anxiety over generations. While changing the political culture in a society is not an easy task, reformulating the education system in a way that fosters critical thinking and generalized trust, including of foreigners, could be a good starting point.

The Unbearable Heaviness of Being a Turkish Citizen

by *Emre Erdoğan*

There is no ethnic definition for being a Turk, except a statement in the Constitution defining every citizen of Turkey as a Turk. This is not unusual, because Turks are ethnically so diverse that any ethnic or race-based definition would be insufficient to cover all members of the society. The constitutional definition seems to form a minimal point for consensus; however citizens of Turkey are so diverse that even this minimal definition is a matter of discussion. During last two years, the four different political parties on the parliamentary committee for the new constitution put forward several different proposals for this definition, but the committee was dismissed before completing its mission.

Despite their diversity, Turks have a common characteristic: thinking that Turkey has no friends and that every other country in the world is a potential enemy. The United States has been perceived as one of Turkey's biggest enemies in most opinion polls, despite 60 years of close cooperation on political, economic, and security issues. The latest Transatlantic Trends Survey conducted by the German Marshall Fund of the United States demonstrated that only one-third of Turks have a favorable opinion about

the United States (www.transatlantic-trends.org)

This attitude is not exceptional, but is part of a pattern. Almost every comparative survey shows Turkey has one of the most xenophobic societies in the world. Turks do not have confidence in international institutions; they believe that nation-states may ignore international law, and that military force is more important than economic power. This makes Turkey an exception compared with any group of similar countries in terms of level of economic development, religion, or geography.¹ For example Turkey ranks 49th among 59 countries included in the last wave of World Values Survey in terms of trusting the United Nations.²

Students of the realist approach to international relations can explain this uniqueness by underlining Turkey's geopolitical location or its Ottoman heritage. However, framing the problem from a psychological perspective can be useful to better understand how individual citizens of Turkey acquire these attitudes.

The situation is labeled as the "Sèvres Syndrome," referring to an histor-

¹ In Turkish, http://www.aciktoplumvakfi.org.tr/pdf/yalniz_ve_endiseli_ulke_turkiye.pdf

² www.worldvaluessurvey.org



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ical event in the memories of all Turkish citizens. This syndrome, so named in the 1990s, describes a common anxiety that Turkey is targeted by foreign powers aiming to divide the country as provisioned in the Treaty of Sèvres, which the Ottoman Empire was forced to sign after World War I. It was never ratified and implemented, but is still taught in the Turkish education system.³

The Turkish political culture and education system have reproduced this anxiety over generations. A very simple battery of survey questions illustrates this: 60 percent of the Turkish population believes that “Western powers” aim to disintegrate Turkey, as they have in the past. Similar percentages agree that the reforms that the EU expects Turkey to implement within the framework of the accession process are similar to articles of the Sèvres Treaty, and that the attitudes of Europeans toward Turkey is based on the “crusader ideals.”

These levels remained the same in different surveys conducted in 2003, 2006, and 2012. While almost one-quarter of the Turkish population has been renewed through generational replacement, there has been no change in the intensity of Sèvres Syndrome, a clear indicator of the success of the education system and political culture in shaping people’s attitudes.

Every analysis of Turkish foreign policy has to take this phenomenon into account; this syndrome is the DNA of Turkish political culture. Changing environmental factors such as economic growth, prosperity, and enduring peace directly affect its expression, which leads even to increased trust towards foreigners. But the possibility of the reversal of that trust is very high: a sudden change in internal or external political environment may easily result in a change or a swing in public attitudes, and doves can easily be transformed to hawks.

The Sèvres Syndrome is typical of a political community’s “chosen trauma.” Vamik Volkan defines chosen trauma as “an injury inflicted upon a large group by an enemy group,” as a result of which the victimized group has experienced losses, shame, and humiliation. If the chosen trauma is not healed by a mourning process, it becomes a “significant marker for the large group identity.” Political leaders enjoy

stimulating this trauma to justify their otherwise unpopular policies whenever they think they need to.⁴

In the Turkish case, there are two central pillars of the chosen trauma. The first pillar is the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and the independence wars of ethnic minorities of the day — Greeks, Albanians, Bulgarians, Romanians, Arabs, and Armenians — supported by the British, French, Germans, and Russians. The second pillar is the humanitarian tragedy caused by the dissolution of the Empire. The Balkan Wars and World War I caused massive migrations of Balkan Muslims to Anatolia in 1876, 1913, and 1922. Casualties were also very high; from 1912 to 1922 between 600,000 and 1.5 million civilians belonging to the groups in the Ottoman Empire that would later form the Turkish nation died. The Armenian and Greek civilians who died during the same period is not included in this figure.

The founding fathers of the Turkish Republic united this diverse group, with nothing in common other than religion, under a new tent called the Turkish nation. Every single member of the society living under this tent had the right to be a Turk, regardless of ethnic identity so long as that person was ready to forget about it. The political leadership of Turkey promised the members of this new nation they would prevent such a trauma in the future.

Since this trauma is the central support of the new tent and the unity of the nation is dependent on its acceptance by all subgroups, the Turkish education system has been formulated to communicate it over generations. Political leaders have exploited the trauma by adapting their political

Political leaders have exploited the trauma by adapting their political discourses and selectively identifying external enemies and in some cases internal collaborators according to needs of the day.

³ About Sèvres Syndrome, see Göçek, Fatma Müge (2011). *The Transformation of Turkey: Redefining State and Society from the Ottoman Empire to the Modern Era*

⁴ Among many of Volkan’s works, see <http://vamikvolkan.com/Chosen-Trauma,-the-Political-Ideology-of-Entitlement-and-Violence.php>



discourses and selectively identifying external enemies and in some cases internal collaborators according to needs of the day. Turkish political history is full of such exploitation and conspiracy theories. One example is the violation of the rights of Christian minorities on grounds that “they are usual suspects for being collaborating with foreign enemies, as witnessed during World War I.” Another example is political leaders attributing their own failure to external forces. When the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in 2002, some opposition circles claimed that the United States had brought the AKP to power as part of the Broader Middle East Project. It is not surprising to seasoned Turkey observers that the AKP is now using the same argument in the opposite way, claiming that the social opposition they are facing and the corruption scandal are actually incited by Americans and Europeans to undermine the success of Turkey under AKP.

This situation is not unique to Turkey. You can replace “Turkey” and “Turks” with another nationality’s name in the region; the meaning does not change. A historical narrative based on a highly exploited trauma and the close proximity of potential enemies seems to be the norm for nation states, particularly in this part of the world.

And modifying cultural “genes” is not easy; it takes generations. Furthermore, environmental factors directly affect these genes. Just as if you are genetically oversensitive to glucose consumption, it is not a good idea to consume baklava (a Turkish-Arabic-Syrian-Kurdish common heritage), similarly, if your nation is wired to be overly suspicious of foreigners, manipulation by politicians does not help the healing process. It may better to limit baklava consumption to once a month, rather than enjoying it every day.

The political culture of being skeptical of foreigners and popular conspiracy theories complicate Turkey’s efforts to develop good relations with its neighbors and closer cooperation with its allies. In the Information Age, it is not possible to spread a conspiracy theory domestically and think that the relevant foreign parties will ignore it. While changing the political culture in a society is not an easy task, reformulating the education system in a way that fosters critical thinking and generalized trust, including of foreigners, could be a good starting point. It would also help

if political leaders made a deliberate effort not to stimulate the distrust of foreigners.

So, let us start with thinking about baklava; is it Arabic, Turkish, Syrian, or Kurdish?

About the Author

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