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Persistent Anti-Americanism in Turkey: External or Internal Causes?

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Over the past years, some analysts have suggested that George W. Bush's unpopular administration spawned the high levels of anti-Americanism in Turkey. Referring to this phenomenon as "anti-Bushism," however, discounted the rise of anti-Americanism in Turkey and implied that the country's adverse view of the United States would change with a new administration. Unfortunately, two recent polls suggest otherwise. Despite the new faces in Washington -- policymakers who have gone out of their way to embrace Turkey and its citizens -- anti-Americanism persists across Turkish society.

Enduring Anti-Americanism

A poll by the Pew Global Attitudes Project reveals that President Barack Obama's election has led to significant improvement in America's standing in the world, including in European and Muslim-majority countries; France and Indonesia, for instance, witnessed increases in U.S. popularity from 42 percent to 75 percent and 37 percent to 63 percent, respectively, between 2008 and 2009. Turkey, however, is a rare exception to this trend. According to Pew, the U.S. favorability rating in Turkey in 1999-2000 was 52 percent, but then sharply dived to 30 percent in 2002, 15 percent in 2003, and 12 percent in 2008. In 2009, with the advent of the Obama administration, there has been only a minimal increase of 2 percent in U.S. favorability in Turkey, from 12 to 14 percent.

Despite the U.S. administration's full support for Turkey's EU membership, continuous assistance against PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party) terror attacks, and diplomatic outreach through very successful and well publicized trips to Turkey by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and President Obama, Turkish public opinion is divided on the new U.S. president: 45 percent say they have confidence in Obama, while 46 percent say they do not (as reported by the World Public Opinion survey, a project run by the ARI Foundation and the INFAKTO Research Workshop of Istanbul) The Pew poll also found that Obama's trip to Turkey and subsequent speech to the Turkish nation had little measurable impact on Turkey's view of the United States or of Obama himself.

U.S. Image Recovering Elsewhere

According to the World Public Opinion survey, many nations, including European allies that were critical of the United States during George W. Bush's term, now say that the United States is playing a primarily positive role in the world: a majority in France (52 percent) and Britain (58 percent), a plurality in Germany (44 percent), nearly half in Mexico (49 percent), and a large majority of Kenyans (81 percent), Nigerians (70 percent), South Koreans (68 percent), and Taiwanese (61 percent). According to the Pew poll, in all but three -- Poland, Russia, and Israel -- of the twenty-four countries surveyed, America's image improved after President Obama took office.

Turkey Remains among Those Most Critical of the United States

U.S. foreign policy. According to World Public Opinion survey, Turkey is top among nations that say that U.S. foreign policy is playing a mainly negative role in the world (72 percent), ranking higher than Pakistan (69 percent), Egypt (67 percent), Iraq (53 percent), Russia (49 percent), and China (41 percent). A large number of Turks (45 percent) also believe that the United States is generally not cooperative with other countries, a view shared by other Muslim-majority nations, including Egypt (62 percent), Iraq (58 percent), and Pakistan (54 percent). Seventy-six percent of Turks see the United States as hypocritical for promoting international laws for other countries but neglecting to apply the same rules to itself (down slightly from 81 percent in 2008). In addition, 86 percent of Turks say the United States abuses its power in forcing Turkey to comply with its agenda (unchanged from 2008), while 86 percent believe America uses the threat of military force to gain leverage over other countries.

According to Pew, the United States is viewed as an enemy by 77 percent of Palestinians, 42 percent of Pakistanis, and 40 percent of Turks. It is interesting to note that Russia, a traditional U.S. rival, is less hostile with 21 percent.

In a significant break from the past, the following two categories suggest that Turkey's negative sentiments toward U.S. efforts have now gone beyond mere differences with foreign policy issues and now affect Turks' view of the United States as well as U.S. citizens.

The United States as a country. According to Pew, Turkey is among nations with a highly unfavorable view of the United States as a country (69 percent), together with the Palestinian Territories (82 percent), Pakistan (68 percent), and Jordan (74 percent). Interestingly enough, countries such as Russia (44 percent) and China (46 percent) have more favorable view of the United States.

The American people. According to Pew, a majority of people in seventeen out of twenty-four nations have a favorable view of Americans. Negative views of American people, however, appear in Turkey (14 percent), Pakistan (20 percent), and the Palestinian territories (20 percent), where little change has occurred in recent years.

Policy Implications

Combined with historical data, these new polls show that anti-Americanism might be becoming an internalized component of Turkish society, and that anti-Americanism in Turkey does not relate to specific U.S. administrations. The reshuffle in U.S. foreign policy -- placing Turkey higher up on the agenda and jumpstarting the strained bilateral ties -- has not produced its intended effect on the Turkish public. While Washington continues to do its share to win Turkish hearts and minds, public attitudes toward the United States will change only if Ankara adopts more positive rhetoric.

For the U.S. image in Turkey to improve, the Turkish government needs to take ownership of U.S.-Turkish ties. In this regard, Turks need to hear from their government that the United States is their friend, supporting Turkey's EU membership and helping them against the PKK -- astoundingly, most Turks believe the United States is actually supporting the terrorist group -- and that Turks share values, institutions, and interests with America. The United States might be doing all the right things for Turkey, but Turkey's perception of America will not improve until Turkish government officials stress what the United States is doing for the Turkish people. Only positive domestic rhetoric that brings home U.S. policies will dispose Turks more favorably toward the United States.

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