



the Hollings Center  
*for international dialogue*

**Dialogue Snapshot**  
***Decoding Perceptions in US-Turkey Relations***  
**November 2013**

Perceptions have weighed heavily on U.S.-Turkey relations both at the leadership and general public levels. Despite an often robust bilateral relationship with the US, Turkish public opinion has always been skeptical of U.S. involvement in Turkey and the Middle East. On the other hand, U.S. public opinion on Turkey is usually uninformed or lacking important nuances. Though this has changed in recent years with Turkey becoming a strategic ally for the US on many fronts, there is still an information and communication deficit that hinders mutual understanding between the two societies. On both sides, public opinion can matter when making policy, especially when the two countries are trying to build a “model partnership” on many levels. Perceptions that lie at the root of public opinion and the opinion of leadership are deep-seated and hard to change. Recognizing this, the Center aimed to focus on a number of domestic and foreign policy issues that have caused strains in the U.S.-Turkey relationship in recent years, and through this discussion, contribute to decoding some of the deep-seated perceptions on both sides.

Dialogue participants were asked the following questions: Why do perceptions weigh so heavily on Turkey-U.S. relations? What are the foreign policy goals of each nation? What effect have foreign policy decisions in the recent past had on the relationship? Can public perceptions affect foreign policy and do foreign policy decisions in turn affect public perception? Have those perceptions changed since the Arab Spring and the crisis in Syria? What grassroots efforts are affecting the relationship? What are the future prospects for the Turkey-U.S. relationship as a new generation rises to leadership?

**“The US-Turkish relationship is one that can be described as high maintenance, high reward.”**

**- Participant from the United States.**

To address these issues, the Hollings Center convened a three-day Next Generation Dialogue entitled, “Decoding Perceptions in Turkey-U.S. Relations.” Held in Istanbul Turkey from November 13-16, 2013, the dialogue brought together scholars, journalists, civil society members, and policy makers to discuss this unique and important relationship, looking at not only the recent past but also looking into the future.

From the dialogue, the participants reached the following conclusions:

- While the relationship between the US and Turkey has experienced setbacks recently, the relationship is still comparatively strong with plenty of room for collaboration and cooperation.

Misperceptions of both leadership and the general public are having an impact, but these can be rectified.

- The nature of the relationship between the US and Turkey has changed significantly in the last ten years, from a relationship established primarily for Cold War military and security cooperation to a more sophisticated relationship that promotes mutual interests of economic development and regional security. This has brought in more players that have a stake in the relationship both within and outside government institutions.
- The relationship suffers from crisis and triage fatigue, predominantly due to the lack of a defined policy of each government toward the other. The relationship must emerge from its crisis-to-crisis nature to be viable in the coming century.
- Current public perceptions of both populations towards each other suffer from monolithic categorizations that oversimplify. Effort needs to be taken to display the dynamic nature of each society, especially the backgrounds and opinions that exist in each country. There are many “Turkeys” and many “Americas.”
- In foreign policy circles, perceptions have been marred by miscommunication and mixed messages on both sides. This has caused many of the recent setbacks in the relationship between Turkey and the US, but these can be corrected and overcome.
- For a strong relationship to continue into the future, the relationship will need to be actively cultivated and nurtured in younger generations. It will not persist on history or develop organically.

#### **“It’s Not that Bad:” The Actual State of the US-Turkish Relationship**



A 1939 Turkish postage stamp commemorating the United States, featuring Presidents İnönü and Roosevelt.

Source: Wikimedia Commons

expectations toward each other, the relationship instead has oscillated between crisis points, requiring leaders on both sides to triage their priorities and actions. So long as the relationship remained one primarily of military necessity, it was easy to maintain.

Despite the success of the military-security relationship dating back over 60 years, it is important to note, as one participant stated, there was never a “Golden Age” in U.S.-Turkish relations. There have always been disagreements, suspicions of motive, incorrect assumptions, and high and low points. And interestingly enough, these fluctuations reflect the types of disagreements between the two countries today. For example, in 1957, U.S. Secretary of State Allen Foster Dulles was openly critical of Turkey’s policy on Syria.<sup>1</sup> During the Iranian hostage crisis in 1979-80, Turkey refused to join the economic embargos on Iran.<sup>2</sup> This repeating pattern of disagreement highlights the difficulty the relationship has always faced. Rather than adopt comprehensive, long-term policies and

However, since the end of the Cold War, the nature of the relationship has changed significantly, getting inherently more complex, while still maintaining crisis-to-crisis nature that one participant referred to as a “yo-yo.” There was agreement among the participants that since 2002, the military aspect of the U.S.-

<sup>1</sup> New York Times, October 17, 1957, pg. 8

<sup>2</sup> Sarasota Herald Tribune, May 23, 1980.

Turkish relationship has decreased in importance. There are multiple reasons for this. First, Turkey took important democratization steps to reduce the military's influence over domestic politics. Likewise, while the US has been involved militarily in the region, the actual presence of American military forces in Turkey has declined since the end of the Cold War. Second, as Turkey emerged from the economic crisis of 2001 with fresh political leadership and began accession negotiations with the European Union, its economic and political priorities transformed significantly. The Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power, pledging to make Turkey a top ten global economy by 2023. Thirdly, the non-economic security concerns for Turkey also shifted after the Cold War from "outside enemies" to "inside enemies" such as domestic terrorist groups. This changed the nature of the security cooperation with the US. Whereas before Turkey sought help from the US for external threats, now it is looking for shared intelligence to take better precaution against guerilla groups and other international terrorists.

The decline in the importance of the military-security relationship has also changed the nodes of communication between Turkey and the United States. These new nodes have struggled to replace the high level military contacts that used to define the relationship, and the effects of establishing new channels are still playing out. In Turkey, inter-institutional and intra-institutional communication has struggled to catch up to new realities, especially in light of the Arab Spring in 2011, resulting in miscommunication with their American counterparts. In the US, lobbying groups speaking on behalf of Turkey have diversified and become more organized. These groups have offered positions and opinions that are sometimes in direct contrast to official statements by the Turkish government. This has resulted in confusing views of Turkey in U.S. leadership circles. Meanwhile, in the general public, some nodes of communication are closing. As Turkey has developed its own mass-media outlets, the consumption of American media (movies, TV, and writing) has become less important and common. Consumption of Turkish media in the US is non-existent. Traditional nodes of interaction, such as student exchanges, have stagnated. The number of students going to the US from Turkey has remained steady in recent years, holding at approximately 12,000 students<sup>3</sup> per year over the last 10 years, while the number of Turks studying abroad to other countries like Germany and the UK has increased. Likewise, very few American students are traveling to Turkey for study—less than 2,000 according to IIE's Open Doors survey.<sup>4</sup> Declining levels of exchange have resulted in two populaces that know very little about each other in reality.

### **Which Turkey, Which America?**

A major takeaway from dialogue discussions was how clearly public perceptions of both Turkey and the United States are rooted in over-simplified, monolithic mindsets. These mindsets tend to compartmentalize the relationship within tired categorizations - "clash of civilizations," sectarian, Cold War era philosophies, militarism - that overlook the intricacies of the relationship and the significant macro-level problems facing both countries. The reality, of course, is both of these countries are formed from dynamic societies. It led participants to ask, when referring to Turkey or to America: which Turkey, which America? The answer to that question can have impact on the public perception towards each other.

When looking at Turkey, the public perception of the United States in general and of the American public specifically is remarkably poor. According to the Pew Research Global Attitudes Project measuring from 2002 to 2013, a majority of Turks have regularly held "somewhat unfavorable" or "very

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.iie.org/Services/Project-Atlas/United-States/International-Students-In-US>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.iie.org/Research-and-Publications/Open-Doors/Data/US-Study-Abroad/All-Destinations/2010-12>

unfavorable” views of the United States and the American people, with negative responses consistently near 70%. There are many potential reasons for this: the Iraq War, official policies with Israel, and the long lingering Armenian genocide legislation, among others. Looking at this base data lends credence to the opinion that the U.S.-Turkish relationship has irrevocably soured. But as one participant noted, understanding the framing of these questions and how results compare to Turkish perceptions of other nations is extremely important. In reality, Turks hold other nearby nations like Iran in the same unfavorable regard. “Turks do not trust anyone, not just Americans, unless they are a part of the family.” When understanding that context, the numbers then seem less severe. As such, monolithic anti-Americanism becomes more of a rhetorical stance, not rooted in reality.

Public perception of Americans towards Turks is equally monolithic. Participants noted that in American eyes, Turkey is seen almost entirely as part of the “Islamic World,” forgetting Turkey’s historic connections to the west and its secular foundation. When Turkey is presented in the media to the American public, it is presented through this simplified lens and often in a bad light. Instances like the Gezi protests are being erroneously linked to the “Arab Spring” and all of the trepidations and negative associations that come with that linkage that exist in American minds. This categorization fails to bring to attention key realities, such as Turkey’s aspiration to become an EU member, the divisions within Islam itself, and Turkey’s distinctive secularism. But the categorization also glosses over some significant problems within the country, such as challenges to freedom of expression and press.

The reality is that neither Turkey nor the United States should be viewed monolithically. Both establish foreign policy through a variety of means and viewpoints. In the United States, the State Department and the administration are not the sole foreign policy actors. Members of Congress and caucus groups develop their own foreign policy stances. Private citizens also play a role individually or through corporations, non-governmental organizations, and lobbying groups that advocate certain policies. Likewise, there are multiple Turkish actors in the United States other than just official representatives of the government and the AKP. Political opposition parties, such as CHP, maintain an office in the US. Non-governmental groups like the Gülen movement have also established a significant presence. The Gülen movement alone has sponsored hundreds of primary charter schools in multiple US states, set up Turkish Studies programs at universities, and funded policy think tanks. The diversity of actors and viewpoints determining the policy positions in both countries should be noted as strengths. But sometimes the presence of these groups can lead to misunderstanding and confusion that can complicate the formal relationship, particularly in times when these outside groups take controversial stances or action.

Yet in spite of the misperceptions that exist between leaders and the general public in both countries, the relationship remains relatively strong. When asked in a survey who the most important economic and security partner is for Turkey (when framed against other nations), a participant noted that the US is still held in high regard. The continued strength of the relationship in the face of strong public misperceptions led participants to question whether public opinion actually matters when it comes to making official policy. The answers by participants were mixed.



Secretary of State John Kerry and Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu at a press conference in 2013.

Source: Wikimedia Commons, US Department of State

On major matters, it appears that public opinion does matter in making policy. Recent public opposition in the US toward Syrian military intervention and Turkish public rejection of the use of Turkish bases for the invasion of Iraq in 2003 were cited as examples. However, on minor matters, it appears that public opinion matters less. As one participant noted, “While Turkish society is very anti-American it doesn’t reflect into a public rejection of cooperation with the US.” American cooperation with Turkey is still considered very important. Partnership on many issues remains ever possible.

### **Combatting Collective Ignorance and Miscommunication**

Looking beyond general public perception, the discussion then turns to the importance of the perceptions held by the leadership and elites in both countries in maintaining a strong relationship. Doing so, for many of the reasons noted above, remains a persistent challenge. As one participant noted, the U.S.-Turkish relationship is one of “high maintenance, high reward.” It is a relationship in which “style points matter.” It is therefore disturbing as participants noted numerous examples that suggest there is a collective ignorance about each other on both sides of the relationship. Ignorance about history, culture, and a lack of personal and institutional relationships all foster misperceptions among the leaders of both countries, which then can filter down to public perception.

The United States has been sending mixed messages, particularly in regard to the Arab Spring protests and their effects. Throughout 2011, the Obama administration was exemplifying Turkey as a successful model of democracy in an Islamic country. This image of Turkey as an Islamic democracy is projected by the US into the entire region, forming the basis of the administration’s regional vision. However, when it comes to having a specific American policy on Turkey, one participant stated that such a formal policy does not exist. This lack of a policy resulted in several misjudgments that have not only forced the administration to backtrack on previous statements about Turkey, but also fostered misperceptions in Turkish foreign policy leaders about the intentions of the US.

There are several recent examples of these mixed messages from the U.S. government. In general, the U.S. involvement in the region has been in a state of flux since President Obama’s inauguration in 2009. After an initial push of foreign policy presence in the region (evidenced by the president’s speech in Cairo in June 2009 and the appointment of Sen. George Mitchell as special envoy to the region), the administration increasingly began to signal withdrawal from the Middle East with the departure of combat troops from Iraq in 2011 and discussion in U.S. foreign policy circles about a “pivot to Asia.” While the US saw the actions of the administration as a rebalancing of priorities in the region to pre-9/11 levels, the region perceived the change as disengagement. Such feeling was further substantiated as the administration looked to regional partners to mediate the 2011 protests and European involvement in the Libyan conflict. Even with Secretary Kerry’s heavy engagement with the region, this perception of American departure persists.

This pattern of limited engagement continued with the U.S. response to the Syrian civil war and participants highlighted how U.S. communications may have affected Turkish actions. Throughout 2011 and early 2012, U.S. officials issued many public and private statements calling for Assad to leave Syria and noting publicly that the collapse of the Assad regime was imminent. The US then turned to regional actors such as the Arab League and Turkey to take the lead role in the cessation and mediation of the conflict. Some participants argued that a perception existed in Turkey that regional action aimed at removing Assad would have full American and international support. To that effect in early 2012, Turkey officially stated its support for the Syrian National Council, a statement that did not receive public support from the US and a group the US has backed away from. But American oscillation on





Dialogue participants discuss the formal foreign policy relationship between each country,

Photo: Jonathan Lewis

commitment and intervention has not helped. It has created the impression that the US wants to dictate an outcome, but remain at an arm's distance. Turkey, on the other hand, has forced itself into a position difficult to defend by becoming a player in the crisis rather than a mediator in its resolution. All the while, more refugees from Syria continue to arrive in Turkey, and while participants commented that Turkey has done an exemplary job hosting the refugees, many agreed that the persistent, non-ending crisis could place strain on Turkey in the long-term. As one participant stated, "The US can't push policies on others that it isn't prepared to carry forward itself. Turkey cannot push policies it cannot do itself." Miscommunication and misperception on both sides about intention, ability, and execution have strained the relationship, but more importantly pushed the

conflict toward quagmire instead of resolution.

Turkey has also sent its share of mixed messages in the relationship, which have led to a perception in American policy circles that Turkey is pursuing short term goals at the expense of the big picture. Different ministries have been pursuing different policies and in some cases not communicating intentions internally. An example cited throughout the dialogue was the recent deal Turkey signed with China for a missile defense system—a system that is incompatible with existing NATO systems, but a system that was less expensive and came with proprietary technology that the Chinese were willing to share. Part of this current dispute stems from a lack of understanding of Turkish law by the United States, but part of it also stems from a lack of a coordinated response within the Turkish government about planning. Elements of the government pushed forward without consulting members of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs about the impact. The result was a sore point in U.S. opinion of Turkey.

Other actions by the government in recent years have further called Turkey's long-term foreign policy objectives into question, making Turkey look as a regional opportunist rather than a regional leader. One participant echoed a common public sentiment about Turkey's foreign policy—going from "zero problems" to zero friends. Some participants noted the government's intentional runarounds of international sanctions of Iran as an example. American participants noted how Turkey's anger towards Israel after the raid on the *Mavi Marmara* off the coast of Gaza in 2010 not only may have irrevocably damaged its relationship with Israel, but also complicated the relationship with the United States. In the Egyptian crisis as well, Prime Minister Erdoğan's political statements condemning the military coup and the suppression of Muslim Brotherhood sympathizers in June 2013 severely damaged Turkey's relationship with Egypt. Rather than coming up with a plan to engage the interim government, ambassadors have been recalled or expelled followed by provocative diplomatic acts that will make reconciliation less likely. None of these examples have helped Turkey's relationship with the US.

In spite of recent setbacks, the relationship is still well founded and remains very important. As one participant noted, "The US and Turkey agree on the big issues, but differ on the approach." To better

understand the difference in approach and to decrease the possibility of misperceptions stemming from miscommunication, both countries will need to focus on developing more institution-to-institution connections that are beyond the existing military or NATO connections. The current, personal connections between leaders only make the relationship more fragile and susceptible to the “yo-yo” effect. A possible exercise for building these connections can come from collaboration on Turkey’s economic priorities. Some participants suggested using the ongoing Trans-Atlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) negotiations with Europe as a way to strengthen the U.S.-Turkish relationship by cooperating so that Turkey could have a voice in the proceedings.

### **Cultivating the Relationship in the Next Generation**

To conclude the dialogue, participants spent time discussing the next generation and how the relationship can persist and be strengthened as that generation rises to leadership. Participants readily concluded that if the relationship is to persist in the future, it must be actively cultivated and will require political will on both sides. For this generation in particular, the relationship cannot rely on past history nor can it grow organically. There are too many negative forces in play to rely on inertia.

In the US, the rising Millennial generation was noted as having remarkably short attention spans. A participant noted that very few closely follow political protests in the region, let alone the protests in the summer of 2013 at Gezi Park in Istanbul. And those that did know about those events quickly diverted their attention to other matters, often ones directly affecting their daily lives. Due to high levels of youth unemployment, coupled with dramatic spikes in the level of student debt that suppresses economic mobility, focus is turning inward for this generation, preferring to address challenges and issues that locally affect them.

Likewise, the rising generation in Turkey is also starting to turn inward, but for different reasons. Unlike their American counterparts, this generation in Turkey has experienced unprecedented economic growth. As a result, some of the existential problems and external threats that earlier generations faced are not present with this generation. This inward turn thus focuses on some of the problems within Turkish society. These issues include protests against the government (Gezi Park for example), reflection on the Kurdish issue, and open discussion about Turkey’s relations with Armenia. Like their American counterparts, there is some uneasiness, particularly about issues of economic fairness.

This generation does have some collective, common problems that transcend national boundaries. As one participant highlighted, there are signs globally of the beginning of a breakdown in the basic social contract of the state in relation to its citizens. As one stated, “There is a decline in the welfare state. Debt and risk are up. There are environmental concerns and personal income concerns that are coupled with a fourth generation of the middle class that doesn’t have as prosperous a future greater than the generation before.” This has created unease and even overt frustration in members of this generation in both the US and Turkey. And yet, this generation remains relatively disengaged. According to a survey quoted by one participant, only 10% of the youth in Turkey consider themselves politically active.<sup>5</sup> Young Americans are equally apathetic. In a recent finding of the Harvard Public Opinion Project, only 25% of those young Americans surveyed from 18-29 identified themselves as politically active.<sup>6</sup> Such apathy among both populations suggests that despite all of the social media tools at their

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<sup>5</sup> <http://infografik.com.tr/yasam/sebeke-sunar-turkiyede-genclerin-katilimi-2013/>

<sup>6</sup> <http://harvardpolitics.com/hprgument-posts/angry-yet-apathetic-young-american-voter/>

disposal, young Americans and young Turks are not connecting with each other. They share similar frustrations, but have not channeled that into any kind of mutual partnership.

Disengagement, lack of social connections, and inward focus: How can the U.S.-Turkish relationship be sustained as this new generation rises to power? The participants described multiple ideas that would not only help the current state of the relationship, but promote its long-term viability with the new generation. Those ideas included:

- **Explore Opportunity for Economic Cooperation:** The US has significant soft power tools, particularly economic, that can be used to strengthen the relationship for the long-term. Advocating for Turkey in the TTIP negotiations and discussion of a free trade agreement between the US and Turkey can serve as building blocks of a new long-term economic paradigm that would benefit future generations. Furthermore, Turkey's recent economic negotiations with the EU have given that country significant experience in developing trade pacts and treaties. By engaging in trade negotiations, the US and Turkey can improve economic ties and can build awareness on issues of mutual concern.
- **Build upon other Soft Power Models:** Lobbying on behalf of Turkey in the US has become more coordinated and successful in recent years. As such, the infrastructure to build positively upon the relationship and increase awareness of Turkey in the American public outside of Washington, D.C. exists and can be expanded. Participants called for the development of a civil society-based strategy to improving the relationship in contrast to the pre-existing military or security relationship. Such a strategy would improve the institution-to-institution links that are currently lacking.
- **Don't Forget the Small Things:** As one participant put it, international relations in this era need to be thought of as "business as retail." Small things like politeness and etiquette matter. One Turkish participant provided an example of his recent experience with U.S. consular operations while applying for a visa. He complimented how easy the process was and how polite the consular staff treated him. Considering this is the first direct exposure that many Turks will have with the US, it is very important to establish a pleasant experience. Easing basic administrative processes and adequate training can go a long way to countering general misperceptions. Again, as one participant said, "style points matter."
- **Promote English Language Education in Turkey:** One of the big problems facing the relationship is the lack of English language knowledge by the Turkish population outside of the big cities of Istanbul and Ankara. This communication barrier can exacerbate misperceptions between both sides, and it also stymies the government's plans to make Turkey a world economic power. With English now becoming the language of business, Turkey should put effort into English language training and the United States would be a good partner to help in this effort.
- **Promote Academic and Educational Programs in the US:** Academic programs should be established at American colleges and universities to increase awareness of Turkey among younger generations. This could include support for Turkish language instruction, institutions to support the study of Turkey, and the sponsorship of study abroad programs to Turkey.
- **Continue and Strengthen People-to-People Exchange Programs:** Many programs that promote exchange between Turks and Americans already exist, such as Fulbright, Humphreys, the Young Turkey, Young America program, and American style schools. Multiple participants highlighted their positive experiences with these programs, with one noting that such exchanges "make us



bi-cultural” and grant greater understanding of the two countries. These programs should be fully supported and expanded.



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The Hollings Center for International Dialogue is a non-profit, non-governmental organization dedicated to fostering dialogue between the United States and countries with predominantly Muslim populations in the Middle East, North Africa, South Asia, Eurasia and Europe. In pursuit of its mission, the Hollings Center convenes dialogue conferences that generate new thinking on important international issues and deepen channels of communication across opinion leaders and experts. The Hollings Center is headquartered in Washington, D.C. and maintains a representative office in Istanbul, Turkey. Its core programs take place in Istanbul—a city whose historic role as a crossroads makes it an ideal venue for multinational dialogue.

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