

Anti-Americanism in Turkey since 9/11

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ÖZGÜR TAŞKAYA, AUG 30 2009

Defining “Anti-Americanism”

Before talking about Anti-Americanism in Turkey, it is necessary, I believe, to present what Anti-Americanism means. Although the suffix “ism” is supposed to imply a systematic ideology or doctrine as in communism, capitalism, fascism etc., Anti-Americanism is not a proper ideology, but rather a stance including prejudice, distrust and often hatred against the USA; it denotes a certain antagonism against it. Barry Rubin points out that Anti-Americanism is as old as America itself, and he talks about two main themes as being “the vision of the United States as a bad society, which threatens to become the model for the whole world, and that of America as seeking global conquest.” [i]

One important subject should be mentioned as a pretext: Anti-Americanism undeniably includes antagonism towards American citizens as they are the ones electing the politicians who make decisions on foreign affairs. This antagonism is, however, not as severe as the antagonism against the policies of successive American governments. In a 2002 poll conducted in a number of Islamic countries, the average of favorable opinions toward U.S. foreign policy across six different policies was 19 percent compared to a 47 percent favorable rating of the American people. [ii]

In today’s world, Anti-Americanism is an omnipresent global phenomenon. [iii] It can be detected not only all around the world, but also in the USA itself. In some countries, it is especially severe with pro-violence motives against the USA, while in some other countries it can only be seen passively within small fractions of society. Moreover, Anti-Americanism can sometimes be government-endorsed phenomena like in Iran and Venezuela. Hatred towards the USA is explicit in the impulsive rhetoric of the leaders of such countries. Perceptions of the USA internationally is also a crucial factor in order to understand the roots of Anti-Americanism. These perceptions can be paradoxical depending on the perceiver. For example as one professor says, to the secular Europeans, America is a religious country, whereas, to Muslims, America is an atheistic land. [iv]

However, I believe that it would be wrong to make a single definition of Anti-Americanism since there are multiple motives behind this opposition, shifting from one group to another. Therefore, I assert that there are different Anti-Americanisms. These different faces of Anti-Americanism includes different aspects of the antagonism. Some examples; professed disgust for the USA as a whole including citizens; distrust and dislike of American foreign policy; cultural racism which perceives the USA as culturally inferior or uncultured, etc. Even envy is also an important factor as Paul Johnson believes that “envy of American wealth, power, success and determination” plays a factor in nourishing Anti-Americanism. [v]

Is Anti-Americanism in Turkey Really Increasing?

There is certainly Anti-Americanism in Turkey and it has increased substantially after 9/11. Many polls conducted on Anti-Americanism show this fact clearly. For example, a poll conducted in 2006 in Turkey showed that 69% of Turkish people have a negative view of American influence in the world, 20% higher than the year before. [vi]

It is certain that favorability of US has been decreasing in Turkey.[vii] Although American favorability increased in

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2004 by about 10 percent, it then continued to decrease. One poll conducted in 2007 emphasized that the most Anti-American nation is Turkey with only 9% of the surveyed population favoring the USA.[viii] Another study shows that in Turkey, where favorable views of the USA have declined markedly over the past seven years; opinions of Americans have fallen sharply as well. In 2002, this research indicates, positive opinions of Americans declined 19 points in Turkey.[ix] A final study highlights that Turkey is the nation which most dislikes the American ideas of democracy and liberal capitalism.[x]

Reasons for Anti-Americanism in Turkey since 9/11

Identities play a crucial role in contemporary Turkey. Turkish people define themselves through different identities as a result of which, a kind of identity inflation becomes apparent. Yet, it can be observed that there are roughly two main identity groups – apart from ethnic identities – (paving the way for a polarized society) in Turkey. Those who defines themselves as conservative Turks (which also include Islamists) and those who define themselves as secular Turks. The first group is usually affiliated with the ruling Justice and Development Party and the Nationalist Movement Party and the second group is generally affiliated with the Republican People's Party, founded by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. (of course, this is a generalization; there is no clear line here) As a result of this division, there appears no single reason for opposing the politics of the USA. Of course, these two main groups have common rationales for opposing the USA. The Kurdish problem, for example, is one of these problems. After the US entered Iraq, the region became divided and an Iraqi Kurdistan region was established in the north of Iraq. Most Turkish people, considering this fact, believed that the USA created significant danger for Turkey by entering Iraq. Because, the Kurdistan region is believed to support separatist militant organization known as PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party). For example, Egemen Bağış, former political advisor of the Prime Minister of Turkey and current minister for state and chief EU negotiator, said in 2006, ever since the Iraqi war started, "people on the street have started establishing a link between the U.S. and the PKK. I know that's not true but it's not important what I think. It's important what the masses think." [xi]

Anti-Imperialism is another common element affecting both groups including the Turkish socialists who form very small fractions. The fact that the USA is perceived as the most powerful imperialist country makes it feelings of antipathy inevitable. This kind of opposition has increased in Turkey since 9/11 as the USA intervened in regions which are close to Turkey, like Iraq and Afghanistan. In other words, both Turkish conservatives and seculars felt the danger of imperialism, fostered by fierce militarism, much more acutely after 9/11.

Nationalism in Turkey is the binding principle of the last few decades as both secular and conservatives have firm nationalistic sentiments.. These two main identity groups also possess distinct objections against US foreign policy. In the next section, I will clarify these different objections.

a- Islamists and Religious Nationalists

This group consists of what I referred to as conservative Turks. First of all, when Muslims, especially the radical ones are concerned, it is seen that there is a deep-rooted dislike against non-Muslims. This fact stems from both the Quran, holy book of Muslims, and historical experiences. In the Quran, it is emphasized that Muslims should not befriend non-Muslims. (5:51- Quran). Following this verse, a lot of Muslims have adopted critical and negative attitudes against non-Muslims, especially against Jews and Christians. Other than this, as previously stated, historical experiences continue to play an influential role. Especially, the crusades and the demise resulting from them have had a deep impact in the mindset of Muslims. This dislike against non-Muslims has unfortunately had an effect on Muslim Turks too. The radical members of this group, the Islamists, believe that Israel, and thus the Jewish people as a whole, is controlled by the USA politically and economically. Following on, both are major threats to Islam.

In Turkey, the National Outlook Movement, which is apparently the most outspoken Islamic movement, speaks openly against the USA in condemnation. This movement even bases its main policy on anti-American and anti-Semitic ideals. The National Outlook Movement introduced many political parties, all of which were closed down because of their radical religious activities. National Order Party, National Salvation Party, Welfare Party and Virtue

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Party were established and closed down successively.[xii] Today, the National Outlook Movement is being represented by the Felicity Party (Saadet Partisi) which got 5.1% of the votes with a substantial increase in the local elections in 2009. When party's leader's and prominent people's discourses and rhetoric are analyzed, it is obvious that they oppose United States of America which they believe desires the downfall of Turkey and Islam. The fact that the USA is the most powerful country globally with a predominantly Christian population is the main reason why Islamists in Turkey possess a relatively radical tone against it. Radical Islamists, who follow this National Outlook tradition in Turkey, developed anti-American sentiments inevitably. Votes that the Felicity Party acquired in the last election shows us that the number of people opposing the USA just because of their Muslim sentiments cannot be underestimated. This aspect of anti-Americanism is generally valid for the radical Muslims who feel themselves closer to the Islamic world with the dream of union of Islamic countries. It can be said that they have always carried anti-American attitudes; however, their tones and discourses have become much harsher since the 9/11 attacks as the USA's response to it caused the deaths of a lot of Muslim people in the Middle East.

The other aspect, however, covers many more people. And it is mainly the result of US intrusion in the Middle East after the 9/11 attacks. I will refer this other group as religious nationalists (or conservatives). These people in Turkey generally vote for the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) and the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP). They have strong Muslim sentiments as well as nationalistic sense. They can also easily be agitated against antagonism to Islam. After the 9/11 attacks, the USA declared a war on terrorism and began a military operation in Afghanistan in October 2001. The main aim was to capture Osama Bin Laden and destroy Al-Qaida and related terrorist groups. As the war in Afghanistan was going on, the USA, with the help of some other western powers, began the invasion of Iraq within the context of war on terrorism. The so-called aim of the invasion was the USA's claim that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction, a threat to world security. However, during the invasion and after it, America and its allies caused the death of many innocent civilians. The entire discourse of the USA "has been framed by the doctrine of the war on terror that posits terrorism and security as the primary lens through which engagement with the Muslim world is viewed. The reaction to this from the Muslim world has been an intensely anti-Western discourse exacerbated by events such as the Arab- Israeli conflict, the Afghan War and the disastrous outcome of the invasion of Iraq." [xiii] This created a resurgence of religious sentiments in the Muslim countries, which also affected Turkey.

In Turkey apart from humanist groups, religious nationalists were very much opposed to American presence in Afghanistan and Iraq. Some of them thought that this war was not on terrorism, but on Islam. Other events like the prisoner abuses at Abu Ghraib, as well as significant civilian casualties in Fallujah during the Iraqi War increased "anti" feelings. In Muslim circles in Turkey, anti-Americanism has been nourished by any act against Islam coming from abroad.

b- Secular Nationalists – Kemalists

There is another large group of people in Turkey who oppose American policies due to rather different reasons. These are, as I will call them, secular nationalists or Kemalists. Frankel suggests that Anti-Americanism is reflected in the belief that a U.S. desire to control Iraqi oil was the United States' principal reason for considering war. The sentiment, as the author argues, "quickly broadens to include a more general sense of alienation from American society, which is seen as gluttonous and greedy" [xiv] This is one aspect of the opposition against the USA in secular circles.

However, more importantly, the root of Anti-Americanism of the secular variety lies within the conspiracy theories about the USA. It is widely believed by the secular Turks that America has an aim of bringing moderate Islam to Turkey within the context of the so-called Greater Middle East Project. They see the intervention of the USA in Afghanistan and Iraq as indicative of this. It is believed that next step may be Iran, followed by Turkey. "Most ultra-secular pundits speculate about the alliance between moderate Islam and American imperialism – and they despise both". [xv] That's why the Anti-Americanism has been increasing also within this group in the post 9/11 conjuncture. I think that the belief in this conspiracy theory and conspiracy theories in general should be examined to understand the response of secular ones. One expert says that "People are also more likely to believe in conspiracy theories if they feel powerless in the face of large social authorities or institutions, and not part of the mainstream of

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society.”[xvi] Another view suggests that insecure and/or discontented people very often feel a need for a tangible enemy on which to externalize their anger.[xvii] Conspiracy theories may serve to provide an enemy to blame for problems which otherwise seem too abstract and impersonal. They provide ready answers for the believers’ unanswered questions and help to resolve contradictions between known facts and an individual’s belief system.[xviii] The belief in conspiracy theories about the USA can result from this sense of powerlessness and the need to apportion blame. They direct their blame at the USA as it is the most powerful nation on earth economically and militarily in the present situation. This kind of belief can certainly be seen in other factions in the society, but it is predominantly widespread in secular clique.

When the AKP (Justice and Development Party) won a landslide victory in 2002 general election and came to power, secular people’s concerns heightened severely. Founding politicians of the AKP previously worked for the National Outlook Movement and have been seen as a danger to the secular structure of Turkey by the secular Kemalists who believed that the AKP may have been espoused by the CIA aiming to introduce moderate Islam. This perception can also be explained via belief in conspiracy theories as I have shown.

Another aspect of the opposition of seculars to the USA lies in their fundamental view of other countries. They believe that “Turks have no friends other than Turks” as reflected in a famous proverb. Therefore, they have strong distrust against other countries. Especially after the War on Terror, their distrust against the USA became stronger as they believe Turkey may be a future target. Several maps in certain American journals, in which southeast part of Turkey was shown as belonging to so-called “Kurdistan” nourished conspiracy theories about USA and added a lot to the antipathy.[xix] [xx] This fear of Turkey’s being divided by foreign countries dates back to the end of Ottoman Empire. The Treaty of Sevres, a peace treaty between Ottoman Empire and Allies at the end of World War I, proposed dividing Ottoman soils among the Allies. This treaty has never been enforced, but fear of Turkey’s division still continues even today due to many academics and media groups like “Cumhuriyet” which fosters that fear. This kind of thinking is called ‘Sevres paranoia’.

The Future with Obama

It is undeniable that the George W. Bush presidency has been the most disappointing period in history in terms of Anti-Americanism. It was also during his presidency that Turkey became the most Anti-American nation on earth.[xxi] A poll shows that just 2% express even some confidence in Bush and 89% have little or no confidence.[xxii] However, the election of Barack Hussein Obama has created huge enthusiasm all over the world with his promise of change and new direction in foreign policy. The background to the election of Obama should be carefully analyzed as his election has also its symbolic values. First of all, he is the first African-American president in the history of the United States of America. This is especially important considering the history of racism against African Americans in the USA. This is one aspect of the sympathy towards Obama, another is imminent in his Muslim middle name. Moreover, his father is known to be a Muslim, which is welcomed by many Muslim societies. He is also different from his former counterpart, George W. Bush, regarding their discourses. Obama has not been using the discourse of exclusion as in the “either you are with us or against us” doctrine of Bush, but rather he has adopted a conciliatory rhetoric. He also states that he has broken with the past and America is now changing with his leadership.[xxiii]

This world-wide “Obamania” has had its repercussions also in Turkey. Obama’s visit to Turkey was a pretty important one because he indicated the beginning of a new era in his speech there. Some of the critics and theorists have earlier argued that Obama designated the real end of Cold War with his speech. His visit to Turkey is considerable in another point since Turkey is the first predominantly Muslim country Obama has visited. Turkey is also the first overseas country Obama has intentionally visited if the summits of the G-20, NATO and EU are excluded. This shows the USA’s interest in renewing the relationship with Turkey; thus with the Muslim World.

The sympathy of Turkish people for the oppressed and the underdog is a trait of Turkish society. Obama’s situation which I mentioned above made him much more likable than his former counterparts. And, Barack Obama’s elaborate speech at the Turkish Parliament should mark the beginning of a new period in Turkish-American relations. In his speech, he continuously emphasized the importance of a friendly relationship between Turkey and America. He showed awareness of the increasing “anti” feelings against the USA and his speech aimed to fix this. Obama often

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gave reference to Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of modern Turkey. He talked about Turkey's secular and strong democracy as the greatest legacy of Atatürk. He also praised the Independence War of Turkish people, which was a felicitous point considering the nationalistic feelings of Turkish people. His speech would doubtless have pleased the religious nationalists and the secularists. His crucial points were about respect for Islam and finding a common ground for future relations. His keynote remark was that the USA will never be at war with Islam and that they "seek a broader engagement based on mutual interest and mutual respect" by establishing a common ground; categorically dismissing the idea of the clash of civilizations. Another important point he made should be crucial in bringing relief to those who are worried about America's approach to Islam; "The United States has been enriched by Muslim Americans. Many other Americans have Muslims in their families or have lived in a Muslim-majority country — I know, because I am one of them." [xxiv] These words certainly gave rise to sympathy for Obama.

Obama's speech has been met with a widely positive reception in Turkey both by the seculars and conservatives. It is hoped that with the new government of America under Obama, Anti-American sentiment in Turkey will be diminished. If Obama continues to seek common ground and implements his policies to bring change as promised, there is tangible hope that Turkish people will discard their negative views of the USA and adopt a positive attitude.

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