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Bridge No More? Turkish Public Diplomacy and Branding under the AKP Government

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EFE SEVIN, OCT 5 2012

With its geographic location between Asia and Europe, and with its identity as a predominantly Muslim yet secular-democratic country, Turkey has established its role as a bridge between the East and the West for years. Changes in the domestic political landscape in the last decade have put Turkey in an even more prominent position in the international arena. Under the leadership of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the country is an aspiring power in the greater Middle East region. With the AKP (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, Justice and Development Party) government, Turkey has seen unprecedented institutional changes done in the name of democracy, witnessed the decreasing influence of the military over civilian politics, and enjoyed impressive economic growth. Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu's introduction of a well-devised "zero-problem with neighbors" policy, has aimed to strengthen relations with neighboring countries and to increase Turkish presence in parts of the world that has been long ignored by previous administrations.

These developments both in domestic and foreign policy spheres have fundamentally altered the Turkish identity. Yet, this new identity was not necessarily welcomed by each and every actor. Domestically, the new Turkish identity was seen as a threat to the secular-democratic regime. Foreign policy changes were conceived as an attempt to establish dominance in the region and to use potential partnerships with Arab/Muslim countries as an alternative to long-standing alliances with the Western countries. These unwelcoming reactions jeopardized both Turkey's attempt to become a powerful actor in the region and its long-lasting role as a bridge between the East and the West. Turkey needs to rely on its public diplomacy and branding strategies now more than ever to ease ongoing foreign tensions and solve its conflicts with domestic stakeholders.

In this short article, I analyze Turkey's current public diplomacy and branding practices. I argue that the current public diplomacy practices do not have the necessary structural and strategic understanding needed to improve Turkey's reputation in the international sphere. Limited episodes of public diplomacy successes are either circumstantial or are caused by Erdoğan's rhetoric, which is often driven by anger (Steinvorth, 2009). The former is not reliable in the long run while the latter usually is lauded in specific regions at the expense of alienating and angering other audiences. The new Turkish brand identity is influenced by the actions, speeches, and beliefs of Erdoğan and high-level AKP figures that seem to portray a big brother role for Turkey in the Islamic world. In order to better communicate with the rest of the world regardless of their religious affiliations and establish a stable brand identity, Turkey should focus on institutionalizing its public diplomacy attempts and should soften its anger-driven rhetorical style in controversial issues.

Public Diplomacy in Turkey

Public diplomacy, simply defined, is a "communication instrument used in governance" (Gregory, 2008, p. 276). Therefore, in an attempt to assess the success of a given country's public diplomacy strategies, one must connect public diplomacy practices to the overarching foreign policy goals. For the purposes of this research, I will rely predominantly on Nicholas Cull's (2008) taxonomy of public diplomacy projects which takes "listening" as the basis of public diplomacy practice. I argue that this basis shows the difference between the traditional and contemporary understandings of diplomacy and foreign affairs. Diplomacy is no longer exclusive to interstate relations dominated

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by a professionally trained diplomatic corps. Public diplomacy sees various entities such as corporations, civil society, and even individuals as important actors in international affairs. Therefore, public diplomats should be aware of the desires and needs of all these various actors by “collecting and collating data about publics and their opinions” through listening (Cull, 2008, p.32). Cull then lists advocacy, exchange, cultural diplomacy, and international broadcasting as main methods of conducting public diplomacy. I also propose a minor addition of “high profile speeches/actions” to capture the rhetoric employed by Turkey. Led by a charismatic and regionally popular Erdoğan, it is not possible to capture Turkey’s soft power capacity without taking the Prime Minister’s speeches and actions into consideration. I will explain Turkish public diplomacy project within the “zero-problem with neighbors” foreign policy goals.

Turkey is a late-adopter of public diplomacy institutions. Despite long-running activities of public diplomacy nature by various state and non-state actors such as the Turkish International Cooperation and Development Agency and Turkish Red Crescent, a public diplomacy agency did not exist in Turkey until a few years ago. The *Office of Public Diplomacy* (Kamu Diplomasisi Koordinatörlüğü – OPD) was established in 2010 under the Prime Minister’s Office with the help of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The objectives of this office is to: (i) ensure better coordination and cooperation between various public diplomacy actors in the country; (ii) improve Turkey’s reputation; and (iii) increase Turkey’s visibility and activity in international public opinion as they are listed on the OPD’s website.

Since its establishment, the OPD has launched various programs to connect with domestic and foreign audiences, and established online presence in Turkish, English, and Arabic. It is too early to argue for the effectiveness of these projects as certain public diplomacy projects tend to yield results only in the long term (Gregory, 2008). Yet OPD’s conceptualization of projects, and its lack of direct organizational contacts with the government press and broadcasting agencies, and with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (thus diplomats and Turkish embassies and consulates across the world) make it difficult to stay optimistic about the effectiveness of these projects.

It is true that Turkey’s history, culture, and geography might seem attractive to certain audiences and thus constitute a great soft power capacity (Kalin, 2011). However if Turkey fails to effectively wield (Nye, 2011) its power or generate additional power through communication and relationship building (Zaharna, 2007), this soft power capacity will remain unused. The online presence seems to be limited to sharing information on various social media platforms. OPD publishes Twitter feeds in Turkish, English, and Arabic that reach out to around 16,000 followers (around 13,000 of which follow the Turkish feed). OPD Twitter accounts only follow other Turkish government and embassy feeds, and do not interact with any individuals or organizations except for rare occasions of retweeting other institutions’ posts. OPD also manages a Facebook page solely in Turkish with less than 1000 members. Similarly, offline information activities also ignore the role of listening and focus on sharing information with foreign press, and target audiences through projects such as Journalist Committee Program (*Gazeteci Heyetleri Programı*) and Informing Foreign Press Program (*Yabancı Basını Bilgilendirme Programı*). The former program invites journalists to Turkey for short-term visits. The latter invites representatives of foreign press representatives located in Turkey for monthly meetings. Both programs aim to make sure foreign press gets its information about Turkish politics and recent developments through Turkish resources – such as bureaucrats and politicians. In other words, these programs are geared towards sharing Turkish perspective on world events with the foreign media. OPD’s current bureaucratic position under the Prime Minister’s office limits its listening abilities due to the lack of direct access to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs resources such as Foreign Service Officers, embassies, and consulates. In other words, OPD seems to be more interested in broadcasting information than in listening.

Another important function of public diplomacy is advocacy – promoting certain ideas, policies, and interests to foreign publics (Cull, 2008, p. 32). Unfortunately, it is not possible to find any correlations between the main foreign policy issues as described by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and OPD’s projects. Addressing these policy issues such as Turkey’s position and policies on the Cypriot conflict, Armenian Genocide, and European Union membership, could help the country to realize its objectives.

International exchange programs – let it be at an academic or professional level – are not new to Turkey. However, these programs have been led by universities, several government agencies, and non-governmental agencies, without a long-term strategy or an overarching foreign policy objective. The high level conferences organized by OPD

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– the modestly and politically correctly named Wise Men Conference Series (*Akil Adamlar Konferansları*) – do not go beyond bringing scholars to Turkish universities for speeches. These programs are unlikely to create long-term relations or communication bridges between Turkey and foreign audiences.

Turkey has also been active in cultural diplomacy and international broadcasting projects. More often than not, the cultural diplomacy projects have been carried out through various agencies, including expatriate Turkish populations, sporadically – again without a long-term strategy or an overarching foreign policy goal. Turkey's international broadcasting is led by two state-owned broadcasting agencies – TRT (*Türkiye Radyo ve Televizyon Kurumu* – Turkish Radio and Television Agency) and Anatolian Agency (*Anadolu Ajansı*) which are not directly linked to the OPD or the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. If Turkey wants to use public diplomacy properly as a device in the diplomacy toolkit, it is of uttermost importance to coordinate these programs and to strategize them based on the country's foreign policy goals and objectives. Without structural guidance, any success in these activities will be circumstantial – as it was in the case of Turkey's popularity in certain Arab countries through the soap opera *Noor*.

Despite the lack of any substantive soft power wielding/yielding activities, how is it possible to explain the rising popularity of Turkey – especially in the Middle East? The answer lies in Erdoğan's behaviors and speeches which are closely followed and widely appreciated by certain foreign audiences predominantly in Muslim countries. As the 2011 PEW Global Attitudes survey shows, various publics in the region express high levels of confidence in Erdoğan (Pew Global Attitudes Project, 2011). After his heated debate with Israeli President Shimon Peres at Davos, he was greeted with "Hero of Davos" signs in Turkey, and people across the Arab world carried his pictures and Turkish flags in street demonstrations to show their support (Steinvorth, 2009). Despite his initial hesitation, he publicly voiced his support to the protestors in the Arab Spring countries, earning him and his country more credibility and popularity (Diab, 2011). He made a high-profile visit to Somalia – a predominantly Muslim country – and tried to share the needs of this country that has been struck by drought and famine in the international sphere (Erdoğan, 2011). He sanctioned a visit to Myanmar to help the Muslim minority in the country (Hurriyet Daily News, 2012). Erdoğan, with his rhetoric and actions, portrays the picture of a *brother* that is ready to answer the distress calls coming from Muslims all over the world.

Overall, the OPD's vision and mission are in line with the "zero-problems with neighbors policy" understanding formulated by the current Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu. Under the guidance of Davutoğlu, Turkey started relations with African and Eastern/South Eastern nations, and strengthened its relations with the Middle Eastern countries. Unfortunately, this idealist policy has had its own share of failures. During the last five years, Turkey had issues with France, Canada, and Argentina over the recognition of the Armenian Genocide (Schleifer, 2011). Turkey is experiencing problems with various countries in the region as well, including tensions with Iraq over continuous border-crossings of Turkish troops, with Syria over Turkish rhetoric towards al-Assad, with the European Union over membership negotiations, and with Israel over several topics following the Mavi Marmara incident (Keating, 2011). Turkey's stern rhetorical stance in the international arena – such as calling the EU negotiation process as unfair to Turkey, naming EU as a Christian club, arguing that "Western cultures are immoral" and accusing Israeli President Peres of murder – raises Turkish credibility and reputation in one part of the world at the expense of other parts. In brief, even though the failing "zero-problem foreign policy" could theoretically be saved by public diplomacy, high profile speeches/actions seem to exacerbate relations with majority of the world at the expense of raising profiles in parts of the Islamic world while the rest of public diplomacy activities remain largely uncoordinated.

Turkey's Identity Crisis

What is the impact of this limited public diplomacy attempt on Turkish brand image? Erdoğan's popularity in the Arab world creates certain problems with Western target audiences, as well as certain demographics inside the country. Turkish brand is embodied in the Erdoğan's persona.

In earlier works, I argued for the importance of three concepts in branding: legitimacy, inclusion, and consistency (Sevin, 2011). A brand identity should be created in a communicative manner. Argumentation should be seen as an internal part of the process and should be valued as such (Hayden & Sevin, 2012). All parties and actors should be included in the process. Lastly, there should be consistency across the messages crafted for domestic and

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international consumption.

AKP has won three consecutive elections in Turkey, and with each victory Erdoğan has increased its power (Dombey, 2012). During the last decade, Erdoğan managed to reduce the influence of military in the political sphere, and restructured the judiciary branch and increased the influence of executive branch in judiciary appointments. Moreover with various questionable court cases aimed at the military, journalists, and Kurdish intellectuals, the opposition in Turkey has been weakened. Leaving the questions of democratic ideals aside, this new structure of Turkish public sphere makes it difficult to create a widely accepted and sustainable brand identity. Controversy and argumentation are important parts of creating place brand identities (Hayden & Sevin, 2012), however it is difficult to argue these processes can work properly within the current social and political configuration. Without social inclusion, political figures cannot argue for legitimacy in creating brand identities.

Consistency remains another important obstacle for the Turkish brand. AKP government is claiming to take Turkey to a democratic future, and this claim has seen acceptance both in the policy world and academia. However, the inconsistency between domestic and international messages/actions creates question marks about AKP's capability to take the country to a more democratic future. Despite AKP's promotion of democracy, tolerance, and individual liberties abroad, it is quite easy to find domestic actions on contrary to their international rhetoric – such as having highest number of journalists in prison, and prosecuting various high-profile opposition leaders and intellectuals based on questionable evidence.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Turkey's newly found popularity in the Islamic world comes at a price. The country has alienated its educated intellectuals and caused its long-time non-Muslim allies to reconsider their relations. With the demise of the "zero-problem foreign policy" understanding, Turkey is in dire need of public diplomacy to promote its identity and to ease tensions with neighboring countries. In the age of (so-called) Twitter revolutions (Zuckerman, 2011) and real-time diplomacy (Seib, 2012), Turkey needs to understand and appreciate the impact of publics and public opinion in international affairs and the role of communication technologies in reaching out to target audiences. Turkey needs to learn how to listen to, as well as talk with, these publics. Without such an approach, it is difficult to argue that public diplomacy will be an effective governance tool.

Logistically, OPD is not designed to meet these challenges. As an office under the Prime Minister, OPD does not have access to the necessary logistical resources in order to create, coordinate, and execute large-scale projects. OPD needs to establish itself either as an independent institution or as an organic part of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Erdoğan needs to loosen his tight grip on the office.

Strategically, public diplomacy needs to become more integrated to the foreign policy mechanisms. As the former US Undersecretary for Public Affairs and Public Affairs James Glassman famously said, public diplomacy is not a popularity contest – it is a foreign policy instrument (Glassman, 2008). Without these strategic connections, it would be naïve to expect any meaningful outcomes from public diplomacy projects.

Structurally, Turkey needs to understand the importance of relations. More and more scholars are leaving the concept of soft power behind, and stress the importance of engagement through concepts such as social power (van Ham, 2010) and soft power differential (Zaharna, 2007). The country has to start building its public diplomacy on listening and engaging with foreign audiences in order to establish itself as a credible and powerful player in the region.

Rhetorically, Turkey needs to continue embracing the entire world. As a secular country with a Muslim population, Turkey has always enjoyed good relations with the Muslim countries and secular democracies. However, recent changes in the domestic politics and international arena kept pushing Turkey to over emphasize its Muslim identity – at the expense of its domestic stakeholders and Western allies.

Public diplomacy will prove to be a viable foreign policy instrument for Turkey in the upcoming years. The country

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claims to have the potential to become a regional power. In order to realize this potential, Turkey needs to discuss and reshape its brand identity through an inclusive process, and should move beyond a one-way communication understanding of public diplomacy. The keys to success in Turkish public diplomacy are to learn more about its target audiences through listening and to build relationships through advocacy, cultural diplomacy, exchange programs, and broadcasting.

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