

## U.S. Public Diplomacy Strategy for Turkey (Rich Outzen SMPA 6270-10 Spring 2021)

### *U.S. Public Diplomacy and Turkey: Fractious Alliance*

Turks and Americans both see bilateral relations between the two countries as troubled and difficult, for reasons ranging from divergent interests, incompatible strategic cultures, regional intrigue, imperialism, radicalism, and ego to ignorance and perfidy.<sup>1</sup> This has long been the case; the two countries allied for security-based reasons rooted in the Soviet threat, and maintained cooperation during and after the Cold War, working through frictions out of prudence rather than enthusiasm.<sup>2</sup> Keeping friction from igniting into conflict has been a key task for U.S. Public Diplomacy since diplomatic relations were established in 1927, which has attempted to inform and persuade generally skeptical Turkish audiences.

A central aspect of Turkish elite and popular culture that drives audience skepticism is the existence of a purposeful and broadly shared official historical narrative. Official historiography was a priority of early Republican Turkey, aiming to instill in citizens a new concept of origins and identity very different than traditional Ottoman or orientalist views of the Turks as barbarous, backwards, or fanatical. Ataturk's modernizing project included systematizing historical depictions of the Turkish nation and state as rooted in centuries of Western migration, consolidation, state formation, military struggle, and a combination of Turkish nationalism and Muslim identity.<sup>3</sup> The early corpus of works by Ataturk (including *Nutuk*, his account of the Independence War), Ziya Gokalp (who focused on linkages between modern Turkey and earlier Turkic states), and other offers provided a comprehensive set of historical claims and identifications that provided a unifying narrative structure. This structure has been disseminated and reinforced through public education, popular art, and political discourse. In this sense, Turkey has a distinctive and particular narrative structure that has

---

<sup>1</sup> Favorable views of the U.S. in Turkey have varied from 9% to 21% since 2003, while unfavorable views have run from 54% to 83%. See Jakob Poushter, "[The Turkish people don't look favorably upon the U.S. or any other country, really](#)," *pewresearch.org*, 31 October 2014. American polling regarding Turkey is scarcer, but Congressional attitudes are a reasonable proxy, and Congress has increasingly soured on Turkey in the past two decades. See David Welna, "[Trump Sweet, Congress Sour on Turkey](#)," *npr.org*, 13 November 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Zanotti, Jim and Clayton Thomas, [Turkey: Background and U.S. Relations](#), Congressional Research Service, 9 November 2020, p. 14.

<sup>3</sup> Eligur, Banu *The Mobilization of Political Islam in Turkey*, Cambridge University Press, 2010, chapters 2 and 3.

remained relatively intact since the founding.<sup>4</sup> Western narratives and historiography that contradict this narrative structure are a hard sell to Turkish audiences.

This paper opens with a brief review of the essential history in bilateral relations, especially events which have shaped narratives still relevant to publics and elites in both countries. It then presents several concepts from theoretical literature on framing and strategic narrative relevant to the case of U.S.-Turkish relations. Following an analysis of Turkish audiences from the perspective of U.S. Public Diplomacy, it argues for a Public Diplomacy strategy informed by Turkish narrative structure to be used by Washington and our diplomats overseas to communicate effectively with those audiences.

### *Brief History of Bilateral Relations*

The defeat of Ottoman armies at the end of the First World War saw Turkey occupied by several European national or proxy forces, including French, Italians, Russians, Armenians, Greeks, and British.<sup>5</sup> Attempts to divide the Anatolian heartland permanently were embodied in the Treaty of Sevres, signed in 1920 and effectively replaced by the Turkish War for Independence and the Treaty of Lausanne by 1923.<sup>6</sup> The First World War was a cataclysmic trauma for Turks that included loss of empire and territory, mass killings and deportations of Armenian and Muslim populations, economic and social dislocations that shaped the young Republic for decades. A number of narrative themes from this period remain significant among Turks, including fear of Western-supported state dismemberment, salvation through military independence, subordination of diffuse identities into a new Turkish national identity, and identification with anti-imperialist struggles, especially among Eurasian and Muslim peoples.

A second period began as the Soviet Union gained strength in the 1940s, it adopted a more aggressive policy towards Turkey, incentivizing Turkey to abandon defensive neutrality and join Western powers in resisting Russian encroachment. This created an opportunity for the U.S., which provided substantial aid to Turkey under the Marshall Plan and facilitated Turkish

---

<sup>4</sup> Kieser, Hans-Lukas "Die Herausbildung des türkisch-nationalen Geschichtsdiskurses (spätes 19.–Mitte 20. Jahrhundert)," in Markus Krzoska and Christian Maner (eds.), *Vom Beruf zur Berufung. Geschichtswissenschaft und Nationsbildung in Ostmittel- und Südosteuropa im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, Münster Lit, 2005, pp. 59-98.

<sup>5</sup> Criss, Nur Bilge, "[Occupation During and After the War \(Ottoman Empire\).](#)" *International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, 5 August 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Grant, John and J. Craig Barker "[Treaty of Lausanne.](#)" *Encyclopaedic Dictionary of International Law* (3<sup>rd</sup> edition), Oxford University Press, 2009.

entry into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1952. From 1947 until 2001, Soviet threat, American aid, NATO solidarity, and gradual political and economic liberalization were dominant themes in Turkish politics and political discourse.<sup>7</sup> During this time Turkey hosted U.S. and NATO forces and strategic weapons, participated in multilateral security operations, and maintained a generally pro-Western strategic posture, but strands of anti-American and anti-Western sentiment emerged in light of the Vietnam War, repeated crises over Cyprus, U.S. security presence and activities in Turkey, and European integration without Turkey. Turkey in the 1990s acted in concert with the West in the Middle East, Balkans, Somalia, and elsewhere, but increasingly came to see its commitment to and dependence on the West as one-sided and even dangerous. Persistent narrative threads from this period in the 21<sup>st</sup> century include the idea that the West never fully embraced Turkey, that Turkish weakness forced Turkey to subordinate national interests, and that Western values regarding democracy, human rights, and a rules-based order were selectively applied and deployed against Turkey for political, rather than principled, purposes.

A third period can be said to have started after 9/11. During this period Turkey experienced significant economic growth, tripling its per capita Gross Domestic Product and expanding trade relations. Turkish politics shifted from a military-enforced authoritarian democracy run by weak party coalitions to civilian authoritarian democracy dominated by Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP), which embraced economic liberalism, multiaxial diplomacy, and a more religiously-oriented world view. Turkey more than tripled per capita Gross Domestic Product (GDP) from 2000 to 2010, and significantly expanded its diplomatic, trade, defense, and industrial networks internationally. At the same time, conflicts on Turkey's periphery in Syria, Libya, Israel and the Palestinian territories, the Gulf, and the Caucasus shook Turkish confidence in its Western foreign policy orientation and cautious approach. Dominant themes in Turkish political discourse regarding the U.S. during this period - which continues today - include a sense of growing self-confidence and self-assertion, duplicity or cavalier attitudes of the West, solidarity with non-Western nations from Latin America to Africa and Asia, and a mistrust of great powers including the U.S.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Keskin-Kozat, Burcak "Negotiating an Institutional Framework for Turkey's Marshall Plan: The Conditions and Limits of Power Inequalities," *Turkey in the Cold War*, Palgrave-MacMillan, London, 2013, pp. 198-218.

<sup>8</sup> Reynolds, Michael "[The End of 'Strategic Relationship'? How American-Turkish Relations Hit Historic Lows.](#)" *Eurasia Review and Analysis*, Foreign Policy Research Institute, 21 September 2018.

The following chart summarizes these key historical points and their general treatment in Turkish media and popular culture today:

<b>Historical Period</b>	<b>Key Events</b>	<b>Thematic views of U.S.</b>
1918-1947	Defeat and Occupation; War of Independence; Sevres and Lausanne; Strategic non-alignment; national identity-building	U.S. not an imperial or occupying power; U.S. as source of modernity; Soviet Union a more natural partner
1947-2000	Soviet threat; Western alignment; political and economic struggles	“Strategic Partnership”; U.S. as indispensable patron; U.S. an emergent imperialist power with a “Greater Middle East” project
2001-2021	Advent of AKP rule; Iraq War, Arab Spring, Libyan and Syrian wars (disorder in the region); rise/return of Russian, Chinese power	Spike in anti-American popular sentiment; U.S. as bent on undermining Turkey’s rise and destabilizing region; need for equidistance b/t great powers

*The Information Ecosystem in Turkey*

Alongside the evolution of Turkey’s views of its region and relations with the U.S., Turkey has undergone dramatic changes in its information environment. Turkey for decades had a reasonable degree of press freedom, especially for print news, but a limited number of press and broadcast outlets. From the 1990s onward, privatization, the advent of the internet era and the rise of the AKP led to a proliferation of outlets, but also a decline in their independence, as corporate and political leaders used a variety of official and commercial means to take “the commanding heights” of media. Media ownership is highly concentrated and sensitive to government sentiment - outlets and journalists are subject to frequent bans and arrests, hampering the scope of critical journalism. Reporters Without Borders identifies three significant risks to media pluralism in Turkey: politico-economic ties of media owners, opaque distribution of public funds, and market regulations that favor media empires linked to corporate conglomerates.<sup>9</sup> The Constitution formally assures freedom of speech, but a variety of criminal, administrative, and anti-terror laws complicate this in practice. The government also has placed

---

<sup>9</sup> Reporters Without Borders (RSF), “[Turkey](#),” *Media Ownership Monitor*, 2019.

relatively intrusive controls on internet usage. Independent media and journalists continue to operate, but do so facing a number of difficulties and restrictions.<sup>10</sup>

The term in Turkish for co-opted print and broadcast media outlets is “yandaş” (comrade) media. According to one 2020 study, there were two dozen yandaş newspapers with nearly 2 million daily circulation, and roughly a dozen opposition newspapers with a half million subscribers. There were 16 yandaş TV stations, and another ten usually friendly to the government, ten opposition channels and three or four occasionally critical.<sup>11</sup> As a result of this sort of pro-government tilt, official narratives and accounts can be amplified, and many outlets use very similar stories, images, and headlines to cover national and international news. Accounting for the low percentage of Turks who speak a foreign language (comparable to Americans and much lower than Europeans), and for some official restrictions on the internet, most Turks can be expected to be exposed to domestic official news narratives without robust balancing by a variety of internal or external voices.<sup>12</sup>

The task of strategic messaging and public diplomacy with Turkish audiences is not altogether hopeless. A study by the Center for American Progress points out trends that have undercut government control of the media, including “rising distrust toward the media and increasing fragmentation in the ways that Turks get their news.”<sup>13</sup> Large majorities of Turks have learned to be skeptical consumers of news and narratives, and to discern official manipulations woven into certain news products. Polling analyzed in the study indicates that 70% the public believe the media is biased and untrustworthy, and 56% believe it is not allowed to speak freely. The public has responded by decreasing reliance on TV and newspaper reporting, which are more susceptible to government control, and increasing reliance on social media and a variety of internet sources. Audience fragmentation has been manifested in deep partisan cleavages, widening generational divides, and resilience of local (as opposed to national) newspapers. Internet usage has become general though not universal in Turkey, with 79 percent of Turks using the internet in 2020 (up from 28% in 2009), 91% of households with internet access (90%

---

<sup>10</sup> Freedom House “[Turkey](#)” (country report), *Freedom in the World 2021*.

<sup>11</sup> Kokturk, Abdullah “[Yandaş, AKP Yanlısı ve Muhalif Gazete ve Televizyonlar](#),” *aynahaber.org* (website), 20 February 2021.

<sup>12</sup> Sarıgül, Kerim “[Türkiye’de Yabancı Dil Bilme Oranı](#),” *Kerimsarigul.com*, 8 November 2018.

<sup>13</sup> Makovsky, Alan and Max Hoffman “[Turkey’s Changing Media Landscape](#),” Foreign Policy and Security (weblog), Center for American Progress, 10 June 2020.

broadband), 51% accessing government services online, and 37% buying goods or services online.<sup>14</sup>

Even as Turkish society has become more internet savvy, the Government of Turkey has stepped up its official narrative tools through expanded diplomacy and digital engagement as well, greatly expanding its information infrastructure and social media usage. The [\*Soft Power 30 Index\*](#) published by the University of Southern California's Center for Public Diplomacy ranks the countries of the world by an index with a variety of measures - culture, government, education, enterprise, polling - including digital soft power, defined as a country's digital infrastructure and capabilities in digital diplomacy. Turkey ranked in the top 30 worldwide for overall soft power despite international frictions and domestic political stress, primarily because it ranked 9<sup>th</sup> in diplomatic outreach and 12<sup>th</sup> in digital infrastructure, including digital diplomacy. Turkish President Erdogan, as well as a tech-savvy generation of diplomats, soldiers, spies, and bureaucrats, have enabled Ankara to tell its story persuasively both at home and abroad (though the home public isn't buying all of it).<sup>15</sup> So U.S. public diplomacy must not only compete in a fragmented, skeptical, and tilted information space, it must compete with an increasingly capable government narrative machine.

### *Conceptual Approach to Turkish Audiences*

Several concepts from the social science literature on framing and narratives offer insights applicable to the Turkish case. Robert Entman's examination of audience response to news emphasizes the key role played by existing belief structures, or schema. Humans are "cognitive misers," and generally will incorporate new information that comports with existing beliefs and assumptions, and reject facts or arguments that contradict them. Reporters, analysts, and diplomats all frame information to persuade audiences of a given problem, cause, evaluation, and solution, implicitly or explicitly. When the presented frame is congruent with existing schema, acceptance by the audience is likely; when incongruent, rejection is likely; when there are elements of congruence and dissonance, a contest of sorts emerges, where acceptance or

---

<sup>14</sup> Hurriyet Daily News (no byline), "[Internet Usage in Turkey Rises to 79%.](#)" *hurriyetdailynews.com*, 25 August 2020.

<sup>15</sup> McClory, Jonathan "Turkey: 2019," [Soft Power 30 \(2019\), Portland](#) (digital consultancy) and USC Center on Public Diplomacy, 2019.

rejection depends upon the quality of alternative frames.<sup>16</sup> Entman's "cascading activation" model of narrative frames flowing from official circles and elites through media and then to publics, with a feedback loop through public response, explains why some messages "stick" in different countries, and how elites and audiences become mutually attuned over time. In the Turkish case, the robust nature of the traditional narrative structure renders it critical that communicators carefully shape frames to observe the broad outlines of existing schema, while narrowly targeting the novel interpretation central to the interest at hand. To be persuasive, media frames and narratives from non-Turks need to show connection to Turkish historical and narrative themes, some empirical tethering, and culturally nuanced message articulation.

While the Internet age potentially exposes audiences to a variety of viewpoints, sense-making for particular messages depends on deeper cognitive processes that cannot be undone by even the slickest visuals or phrases. There is a nesting of stories (a sequence of related events), narratives (a coherent system of interrelated stories), and master narratives (linked narratives transcending a single historical period) that renders certain stories intuitive and natural, others counter-intuitive and unnatural.<sup>17</sup> The same nesting can be described in terms of framing rather than narrative as the linkage between message frames, conceptual frames, and deep cultural or value frames, and in this sense narratives can be considered mid- and lower-level frames (conceptual and message but not values frames).<sup>18</sup> In any case, the goal for public diplomacy must be to craft messages consistent with deeper cognitive and cultural structures. Even if a government successfully convinces domestic elites and public that its framing of an issue is correct, the geopolitical interests, domestic political perspectives, and country-specific deep frames will lead to contestation and growth of persuasive counter-frames against the U.S. message.<sup>19</sup> In the Turkish case, this entails careful consideration by the framing party of at least a century's worth of historical and cultural context in the communications process.

---

<sup>16</sup> Entman, Robert "Cascading Activation: Contesting the White House's Frame After 9/11," *Political Communication*, Vol. 20, No. 4, 2010, pp. 415-432.

<sup>17</sup> Halverson, Jeffrey, H.L. Goodall, Jr. and Steven R. Corman, "What is a Master Narrative," *Master Narratives of Islamist Extremism*, 2011, pp. 1-9.

<sup>18</sup> Lakoff, George *The Political Mind*, Penguin Group, 2008, Chapter 1. See also Lakoff's 2006 [response](#) to Steven Pinker's critique to earlier work in *The New Republic*; Pinker rebutted Lakoff's partisan extrapolations on cognitive theory, rather than the frame analysis, and Lakoff's response elaborated his cognitive theory effectively.

<sup>19</sup> Samaras, Athanassios "Representations of 11/9 in Four Greek Newspapers: A Frames Perspective," *Questions De Communication*, Vol. 8 (2005), pp. 367-388.

Alister Miskimmon et al provide a useful framework for such consideration, linking narratives about the how the world works (system narratives), how the target audience views itself within the world (identity narratives), and current popular characterization of specific phenomena (issue narratives).<sup>20</sup> They argue that narratives are central to human relations domestically and internationally, that political actors can and do use narratives strategically, and that the communications environment at a given time and place affect narrative effectiveness. If a strategic narrative is properly formed and projected, its reception stands greater chances of success. The following sections of the paper will present an audience analysis with recommendations on narrative formation for public diplomacy, and recommended modalities for projection.

### *The Turkish Audience's Narrative Space*

A good starting place for understanding Turkish narrative structures is the approach to self-definition: who is a Turk, exactly? Meral Ugur Cinar describes three types of narratives that link official history, national identity, and citizenship practices: organicism, contextualism, and mechanicism. The first of these posits a “melting pot” based on inclusiveness coupled with homogenization. The second accepts a “salad bowl” of textured layers as pluralistic components. The third perceives the world as a competition among static entities governed by natural laws, with exclusionary practices and little tolerance for heterogeneity. She describes Turkish identity as political and cultural, rather than ethnic, with an ethos of variegated components coming together in a unified nation, and thus an example of organicism. This can be referred to as the “ne mutlu Turkum diyene” narrative (happy are those who call themselves Turk).<sup>21</sup>

Johanna Tuulia Vuorelma's excellent dissertation lays out the complex and challenging nature of Turkish and Western narrative interactions. She finds that Europeans and Americans have used Turkey as an example of the non-Western “other” to strengthen rather loose conceptions of solidarity among “western” nations, sometimes as exotic friend and sometimes as execrable foe, while the Turks have used “the West” as a negative “other” to define and reinforce their unique national identity. She analyzes in detail three prevalent Western narratives

---

<sup>20</sup> Miskimmon, Alister, Ben O'Loughlin, and Laura Roselle *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order*. Routledge, Abingdon (UK), 2013, introduction.

<sup>21</sup> Cinar, Meral Ugur *Collective Memory and National Membership: Identity and Citizenship Models in Turkey and Austria*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2015, chapter 1.



that currently shape interactions between the West and Turkey: “losing Turkey” (that a previously reliable Turkey has gone rogue), “Turkey at a crossroads” (that Turkey is ambiguous, stuck, and liable to head in a bad direction at any time), and “Erdogan-for-Turkey” (generalized perceived and amplified negative traits about Erdogan as defining the country). Her conclusion is that Western depictions of Turkey as a nation and state actor reflect Western assumptions far more than empirical observations:

Foreign policy journals and newspapers published articles saying that Turkish pride and anger explains its politics when what I witnessed around me was a deep sense of self-irony and a sober attitude towards developments both within and outside the country. Islam was meant to be the all-pervasive generating principle of the Turkish political landscape when to my eyes there were also other equally important political movements based on class, geography, nationality, environment, human rights, and so on. Newspapers were talking about the educated urban elites that were liberal in their outlook when it seemed to me that at universities conservative family values and traditional gender roles were more the norm than an exception...I realized that the studies, analyses and reports that I read are equally limited in their capacity to really grasp the real nature of Turkish politics...because our analysis of human action is inevitably intertwined with pro-beliefs...the issue at stake was not about observation but representation.<sup>22</sup>

This demonstrates the narratively complex and challenging nature of Turkey for Western messaging. Reductionist and essentializing analyses are bound to either be dismissed, or to provoke a defensive counter-reaction by Turks who recognize themselves neither in the stories about them from outside nor in external messaging and narratives meant to influence them. This feeds what we might refer to as the “Türk’ün Türk’ten başka dostu yoktur” narrative (a Turk has no friend but another Turk).

Cihan Erkli sees a tension between longstanding official Turkish narratives established by Atatürk’s generation and dominant throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century and newer narratives that have risen to challenge it. Elements of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century narrative structure included de-emphasis of Ottoman history and non-Turkish ethnic identities, resuscitation of pre-Ottoman Turkic heritage, promotion of secularism and Western culture, and restriction of religion in the public sphere. Westernism, secularism, nationalism, progress and modernity were all associated with the image of Atatürk, which was ubiquitous in monuments, on money, and in the education system. Frequent reference to Turkey as a “bridge between east and west” provides narrative support to

---

<sup>22</sup> Vuorlelma, Johanna Tuulia [\*Losing Turkey: Narrative Traditions in Western Foreign Policy Analysis\*](#), University of Warwick, UK, 2016.

Ataturk's vision.<sup>23</sup> The military was also promoted as embodying the ideals and character of the Turkish nation, and ranked as its most respected institution. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century two counter-narratives have arisen to challenge the long-standing official narrative. The first is a nostalgia for Ottoman heritage and renewed sense of connectedness to former Ottoman regions ("neo-Ottomanism"), which tacitly accepts greater cultural pluralism at home and an external orientation as friendly to the Mideast and other regions as to the West. The second is Kurdish nationalism, espoused by a significant portion of Turkey's large Kurdish minority, which holds that the civic rather than ethnic basis of Turkish identity has been undermined by specific denial of Kurdish culture within Turkey. Elements of the neo-Ottoman narrative are seen as expansionist and threatening to some in Europe and the Middle East, while the conflict of Turkish and Kurdish nationalisms continues to stir violence in Turkey's volatile southeast. Erkli concludes that the Western, civic, progressive elements of the traditional narrative must be blended with the positive elements of the newer narratives in order to restore a more stable domestic and foreign policy orientation.<sup>24</sup>

In addition to the rise of narrative challenges to the founding narratives of the Turkish Republic, the 21<sup>st</sup> century has seen an increase in anti-American narratives in Turkey. Given the influence of American power globally and its centrality in Turkish foreign policy for the second half of the twentieth century, some degree of resentment is perhaps natural, and was a constant, though secondary, phenomenon in bilateral relations for decades. After the U.S. invasion of Iraq, though, Turkish anti-American narratives increased in both number and intensity. Turks came to suspect that the U.S. supported the anti-Turkish PKK terror group, due initially to U.S. inaction against PKK in northern Iraq and later to cooperation with PKK-aligned groups in Syria. U.S. troops started a new narrative trend with their unprecedented arrest and hooding of Turkish special forces in northern Iraq in 2003; this broke the image of Turks and Americans as allies, and spawned a popular TV series ("Valley of the Wolves") as well as numerous conspiracy theories. The U.S. "Global War on Terror" came to be seen as selective persecution of Muslim

---

<sup>23</sup> Al-Tikriti, Nabil [Turkey: A Bridge Between East and West?](#) *Fair Observer*, 19 March 2011.

<sup>24</sup> Erkli, Cihan [Through the Turkish Looking Glass: Turkey's Divergent Narratives, National Identity & Foreign Policy](#) (thesis). Georgetown University, April 2010.

countries.<sup>25</sup> Most tellingly, the perception that the U.S. grand strategy comprised a “Greater Middle East Project” of dividing and dominating Muslim countries became accepted wisdom.<sup>26</sup>

Following the 2016 factional uprising within the Turkish military, broadly perceived in Turkey to have been orchestrated by U.S.-resident Fethullah Gulen and tolerated implicitly by the U.S., the anti-American narrative took on broader form as a core element of the “New Turkey” narrative. This narrative holds that Western powers, including the U.S., have been alarmed by rising Turkish economic and military power, as well as strategic independence, and are now working to undermine the ruling party and to divide the state. Turkey’s traditional Western allies are now undeclared antagonists, terror groups are their tools, and Western cultural agents and institutions (e.g. Christian missionaries, financial authorities, courts) their public face. The “New Turkey” possesses the independence and resources to face down these threats, but only if they limit domestic dissent and criticism. This “New Turkey” narrative coexists uneasily with the “Western-oriented Turkey” and “Turkey as a Bridge” narratives, and increasingly has the upper hand.<sup>27</sup>

Favorable opinions of the United States among Turks dropped precipitously beginning in 2002 as the U.S. military response to terror attacks became a Global War on Terror broadly interpreted as “open season” for attacking or destabilizing Muslim-majority countries. In Turkey favorable views of the U.S. dropped from over half in 1999 to 30% in 2002, with similar drops observed in Pakistan, Egypt, Jordan, and nearly every other Muslim-majority country.<sup>28</sup> The drop has proven to be durable rather than transient; a full generation has now passed in much of the Middle East, Central and South Asia with an entrenched view of the U.S. as antagonistic to the countries and religion these audiences populate. Pew’s longitudinal data on U.S. favorability in Turkey (below) illustrate the problem.<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> Asma, Gizem *Anti-Americanism in Turkey: A Comparison of Bush and Obama Periods* (thesis), Middle East Technical University, Ankara, 2013.

<sup>26</sup> Uzgel, Ilhan “[Büyük Ortadoğu Projesi uygulamaya mı konuldu?](#)” *gazeteduvar.com.tr* (website), 25 September 2017.

<sup>27</sup> Vojnovic, Ilija “[The Narrative of the New Turkey](#),” *Democracy Speaks* (website), International Republican Institute, 10 July 2018.

<sup>28</sup> Kohut, Andrew *American Public Diplomacy in the Islamic World* (remarks to Senate Foreign Relations Committee), 27 February 2003.

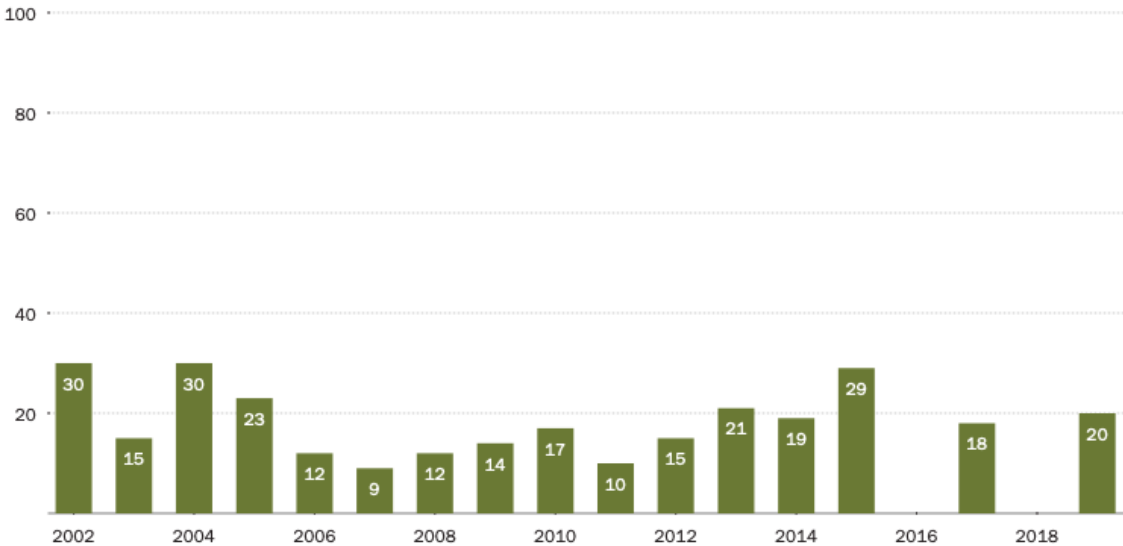
<sup>29</sup> Pew Research *Global Indicators Database* (Turkey country report), [www.pewresearch.org](http://www.pewresearch.org), accessed 25 April 2021.

# Opinion of the United States

## Do you have a favorable or unfavorable view of the U.S.?

Percent of **Turkey** responding **Favorable**, all years measured.

CHANGE RESPONSE ▾



In 2021 there is an added narrative element in bilateral relations: paired ideas that on one hand the West, and the U.S. in particular, are in decline and antagonistic towards Turkey - so Turkey must cultivate ties carefully with Russia, China, and other non-Western powers - while on the other hand, Turkey's Western institutional ties and relationships remain valuable, and should be sustained despite endemic friction. This view accepts the now-structural nature of U.S.-Turkey conflict, abjuring frames like "strategic partnership" and "model relationship," and portrays a complex and somewhat cynical game of lowering expectations, managing crises, and cautiously pursuing transactional cooperation where interests overlap. President Trump carried out a version of this approach, and it will likely be reprised in various forms over the coming decade.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Dalay, Galip "[U.S.-Turkey relations will remain crisis-ridden for a long time to come,](#)" *Order From Chaos* (weblog), Brookings Institution, 29 January 2021.

Finally, there is a narrative complex in Turkey driven by conspiracism, the mode of thinking that links social and political problems to hidden forces and ulterior motives, usually with a blend of fact and extrapolated imagination. Conspiracism operates in every society, including the U.S., and is a common response to modernization and the lack of transparency in governance.<sup>31</sup> In Turkey, many conspiracy theories operate, especially among Islamist and nationalist audiences, to explain the potential threat to Turkey's interests and identity posed by ill-intentioned external enemies. Western spies a la Lawrence of Arabia, disloyal minorities, anti-Muslim foreign powers, and tricky foreign lobbies all feature in a mosaic of external threat which exacerbates real-world conflicts and competition.<sup>32</sup> Any U.S. public diplomacy effort must account for, and avoid reinforcing, conspiratorial narratives, especially through provision of factual data that debunks common misperceptions. Of course, Turks live in complicated geography and does have real competitors and enemies, so we should bear in mind Joseph Heller's observation in *Catch-22*: "just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they aren't after you." Turkey's legitimate security concerns and grievances should be acknowledged in the course of debunking paranoid fantasies.

The following chart summarizes key narratives influencing reception of U.S. messaging in Turkey. Just as the U.S. has multiple overlapping and sometimes competing identity narratives reflecting, for instance, liberal and conservative world views<sup>33</sup>, Turks have several different identity narratives that reflect overlapping political and generational segments. The table organizes narratives about the international system, Turkish identity, and historical metaphors by generational and political segment.<sup>34</sup> The list of narrative elements is illustrative rather than exhaustive or authoritative, but covers most of the common themes encountered in contemporary Turkish political discourse.

---

<sup>31</sup> Sanders, Todd and Harry G. West, "Power Revealed and Concealed in the New World Order," in *Transparency and Conspiracy: Ethnographies of Suspicion in the New World Order*, Duke University Press, 2003, Introduction.

<sup>32</sup> Jones, Dorian "[Turkey Alone Against the World: International Conspiracy Theories and Xenophobia in Turkey](#)," qantara.de (weblog), 26 November 2014.

<sup>33</sup> Lakoff, George *Metaphorical Thought in Foreign Policy: Why Strategic Framing Matters*. University of California at Berkeley and the Rockridge Institute, 1999, pp. 2-10.

<sup>34</sup> This approach blends the narrative typologies of Miskimmon et al (op cit) - system, identity, and message narratives - with that used by Halverson et al - master narratives, narratives, and stories. Halverson, Jeffrey, H.L. Goodall, Jr. and Steven R. Corman, "What is a Master Narrative," in *Master Narratives of Islamist Extremism*, 2011, pp. 1-9.

<u>Political Segment</u>	<u>System/Identity Narratives</u>	<u>Master Narrative Elements</u>
Nationalist (center-right and center left)	Turkey a rising power in a “bad neighborhood”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Turkish-Islamic synthesis</li> <li>• Misak-e Milli (National Pact)</li> <li>• Ataturk as Revolutionary &amp; Commander</li> <li>• The Nation as an Army</li> <li>• Sevres syndrome (dismemberment)</li> </ul>
Ultra-nationalist	Turkey target of imperial powers and their proxies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Turk no friend but another Turk</li> <li>• Betrayal (Arabs, Kurds, others)</li> <li>• Ataturk as Hero-Leader (Basbug)</li> <li>• Pervasive threat of terrorism with support from abroad</li> </ul>
Islamist	Neo-Ottoman (Turkey reconnecting with the surrounding regions)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Turkey as leader of Muslim World</li> <li>• Western power and values a ruse</li> <li>• Elevate Ottoman sultans while showing respect to Ataturk</li> </ul>
Eurasianist	West declining, Russia & China rising, Turkey can balance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cultural kinship with Turkic states</li> <li>• Russia as essential hedging power</li> <li>• U.S. determined to undermine Turkey</li> </ul>
Liberal	Turkey aligned with West	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ataturk as secular Westernizer</li> <li>• Europe/U.S. remain the standard for economic and cultural matters</li> <li>• Turkey as a bridge</li> <li>• “Strategic Partnership”</li> </ul>
Gen Y & Gen Z Turks	New Turkey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Turkey helps oppressed nations and peoples</li> <li>• Turkey should seek access and integration globally, not alignment</li> <li>• Turkey a rising economic, industrial, military, and soft power</li> </ul>
Kurdish nationalists	Turkey as militarist, anti-democratic rogue state	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• State denies rights to minorities</li> <li>• Islam, militarism, assimilation as pillars of unjust order</li> <li>• Noble resistance struggle</li> </ul>

*Ten Ways to Improve U.S. Public Diplomacy Strategy for Turkey*

A country characterized by the trifecta of 1) a generational negative trend in views about America 2) an information environment that promotes official narratives and effectively discounts challengers and 3) a highly articulated, vigorously disseminated, and generally

accepted official national narrative will unavoidably be a hard target for U.S. public diplomacy. Despite the lack of formal censorship or comprehensive control of media, Turkey is such a country. There is no silver bullet that can flip deeply rooted narratives or frames in the short term, and no pathway to bludgeon Turkish audiences into “right” thinking through volume of messaging and selection of right messengers. What is possible, though, is to deploy more attuned public diplomacy products by incorporating texts, images, and techniques sensitive to Turkish narrative structure and political opportunity structure.<sup>35</sup> The following ten points are offered as a program for revitalizing U.S. public diplomacy in Turkey, and breaking out of the self-reinforcing cycle of mutual antipathy that the countries seem locked into at present. Given the nadir that bilateral relations are currently at, these steps will not reverse the negative trend, but will preserve space for improvement once structural conditions permit.

#1: Increase investment in people-to-people cultural diplomacy. Long gone are the days when U.S. military members and their families were numerous in Turkey, had positive experiences, and became two-way ambassadors extolling Turkey to America and America to Turks. Trade, tourism, and educational exchanges have lagged, but are potentially sensitive to official endorsement and support. Such exchanges can help buffer the friction from regional conflicts and policy divergence, and it is time for both sides to recognize that such connections may not flourish in an era of public antagonism, but need patient cultivation.<sup>36</sup> We are no longer in a position of living off the fat from the Cold War “strategic partnership” and cannot afford the luxury of mourning it - we must build anew. Turkish culture places a high premium on personal hospitality, so exchanges will bypass and undercut the aggressive tone both countries take at the official level; this will be especially useful for Gen Y/Z Turks, who have had much greater virtual exposure to America/Americans and much more limited personal contact.

#2: Deepen our “Ataturk vocabulary” in public diplomacy. Ataturk remains the man for all seasons and persuasions in Turkish political narratives, and exercises significant traction on virtually all segments of the political spectrum to one degree or another. Ataturk prayed publicly. Ataturk supported women’s rights. Ataturk advocated Western alignment, and pragmatism

---

<sup>35</sup> Political opportunity structure refers to the prospects for effective political influence or change afforded by contextual factors such as a country’s formal institutions, stability of elite arrangements, presence or absence of elite allies, and capacity for state repression. See Marco Giugni, “[Political Opportunities: From Tilly to Tilly](#),” *Swiss Political Science Review*, Vol. 15 (2009), No. 2, pp. 361-368.

<sup>36</sup> Cevik, Sebnem “[Past Due: Time to Reinvest in U.S.-Turkey Public Diplomacy](#),” *The Pacific Council Magazine*, Pacific Council on International Relations, 9 September 2019.

towards the rest of the world. Ataturk was a military leader who fought in Europe, North Africa, and Anatolia, but advocated a peaceful foreign policy based on co-existence. Ataturk spoke admiringly of the United States, and gave voice to the desire of Turks to overcome the animosities of the past to achieve a more peaceful and democratic future. By fully honoring Ataturk's memory, celebrating his holidays and monuments, and carefully invoking his principles, U.S. strategic communicators can simultaneously build-down Turkish suspicions of general animosity and reinforce specific areas of bilateral benefit and interest. There are numerous images, voice recordings, and written pieces from Ataturk appropriate to reinforce U.S. messaging.

#3: Deepen our "Ottoman vocabulary" in public diplomacy. The Ottomans left a complex historical legacy. The Ottoman millet system protected religious pluralism for centuries, and the Turkish protection of Jewish exiles from Spain is well-documented. Ottoman history provides numerous examples of administrative excellence, religious tolerance, ethnic brotherhood, and artistic achievement. The Ottoman legacies most known in the West, though, are associated with military threat (siege of Vienna), imperial decay (Lawrence of Arabia and the destruction of the Armenian communities of Anatolia), and absolutism (the Terrible Turk).<sup>37</sup> U.S. public diplomacy should seek to deploy examples from Ottoman history that are consonant with current U.S. interests and resonant with Turkey's own sense of historical legacy.

#4: Re-affirm the "Turkey as a bridge" metaphor. After centuries of Turkey and its Ottoman predecessors being "the Terrible Turk" or the "inexorable Turk" to the West, having Turkey as "the bridge between east and west" from the 1990s on was a marked improvement. Since approximately 2010, the bridge metaphor has fallen into disuse as conflicts over regional policy have multiplied. Resurrecting the bridge metaphor would re-introduce a degree of flexibility to the polarized relations stemming from anti-Americanism in Turkey and rejection of neo-Ottomanism in the West.<sup>38</sup>

#5: Incorporate strategic empathy in U.S. policy debates and messaging. U.S. and Turkish messaging about one another have characteristics of a dialogue of the deaf, with each side pressing narratives popular at home but ill-attuned to the receiving audience. One tool for

---

<sup>37</sup> Vander Lippe, John M. "[The 'Terrible Turk': The Formulation and Perpetuation of a Stereotype in American Foreign Policy](#)," *New Perspectives on Turkey*, Vol. 17 (2015), pp. 39-57.

<sup>38</sup> Yanik, Lerna "[The Metamorphosis of Metaphors of Vision: 'Bridging' Turkey's Location, Role and Identity After the End of the Cold War](#)," *Geopolitics*, Vol. 14 (2009), No. 3 pp. 531-549.



better tuning messages is the practice of strategic empathy, defined as 1) purposely gathering information about target nation views 2) sincerely attempting to understand target nation perspectives and 3) utilizing insights from these steps to better achieve national interests. Strategic empathy is an important adjunct to realpolitik in international relations, because it helps discern real motives rather than assuming a monolithic “black box” policy line in the target state. The practice of predicting and influencing cognitive response, rather than the pursuit of stimulus-response policy outcomes, should inform policy discussions and U.S. public diplomacy products - especially those generated from Washington rather than our posts overseas, which generally work in this dimension already.<sup>39</sup> This is most critical with the audience segments most entrenched in their America-skepticism, including Islamists and ultra-nationalists, who deploy grievance narratives based on perceived U.S. disrespect for Turkish national and religious identities. Strategic empathy undercuts grievance counter-narratives by demonstrating cultural respect even in the midst of policy friction, and anticipating where grievances will be deployed or reinforced.

#6: Strategy of ambiguity for hot-button issues. There are a number of issues commonly framed in Turkey as outrageous and unambiguous attacks by the U.S against vital Turkish interests. These feed a betrayal narrative, given the two countries’ status as formal allies. Examples include U.S. support to the Syrian Democratic Forces (a PKK affiliate), residence of accused coup-mastermind Fethullah Gulen in Pennsylvania, and political recognition of the Armenian genocide. Unlike “normal” disputes such as defense industrial programs and the Libyan War, these issues are visceral for Turks and can quickly close down audience receptivity if not handled deftly. Without directly rejecting deeply-held Turkish suspicions or arguing specific points, U.S. communicators should employ ambiguity as described by Goodall et al to lay these issues aside without explicit concession or rebuttal and move forward with desired messaging.<sup>40</sup> Principles of strategic ambiguity include practicing engagement not salesmanship, not repeating the same point, not seeking to dictate message reception in the target culture, maintaining relationships that foster message clarity and reception, and seeking “unified diversity” (compatible meanings that support U.S. goals rather than identical meanings).

---

<sup>39</sup> Grover, John Dale [Strategic Empathy as a Tool of Statecraft](#), Center for the National Interest, October 2016, pp. 1-15.

<sup>40</sup> Goodall, H.L. Jr, Angela Trethewey, and Kelly McDonald, “Strategic Ambiguity, Communication, and Public Diplomacy in an Uncertain World: Principles and Practices,” in *Weapons of Mass Persuasion*, pp 27-38, 2008.

#7: Craft your points according to the audience-specific metaphor, framing, and vernacular. U.S. political messaging to Turkish audiences must be shaped with constant appreciation for the reality of a contested information environment and prevalence of mature and credible counter-narratives, some steeped in greater historical detail than our own. Per Miskimmon et al, narratives must match epistemology and empirical facts as an audience knows them or risk dismissal.<sup>41</sup> Put another way, when facts or arguments are presented in a manner dissonant rather than consonant with deep cultural frames and dominant narratives in the target audience, it is the facts and arguments rather than the frames that are discarded. Effective public diplomacy means knowing, navigating, and working in the interstices afforded by the deeply held frames, narratives, and suspicions presented above; hard, but not impossible. This crafting of locally-resonant message frames is less necessary for more liberal/Atlanticist and Gen Y/Z Turks, who enjoy greater exposure to non-national metaphorical and narrative systems, but is of great importance for the broad swath of Turkish nationalists from center left to center right, who generally have less contact, travel, and language skills needed for message resonance from Western sources.

#8: Rein in the Manichaeian dimension of our own framing. American foreign policy commentators and practitioners on the Left (Wilsonians) and Right (neo-Cons) are prone to framing propositions and engagements in morally charged terms that international counterparts can find confusing, presumptuous, or even perverse. Leon Hadar calls this a “Manichean” penchant for painting the world in black and white tones consistent with our interests, and painting counterparts into a corner in the process.<sup>42</sup> Hadar gives the example of an American official pressing Turkey after 9/11 to form with India an alliance of democracies against terrorism, oblivious to Turkey’s longstanding ties with Pakistan. This was not asking Turkey for a policy concession: it was asking for a fundamental realignment of their national priorities. Morally steeped arguments may work with culturally similar allies (or not), but they certainly don’t work with the Turks. It’s not that morality should not inform our policies on principle, it’s that we should not lead policy presentation with it in practice.

#9: Engage, not demarche on social media. U.S. digital diplomacy with Turkish audiences should be expanded. Currently the Embassy’s social media accounts carry translations

---

<sup>41</sup> Miskimmon (op. cit.), chapter 4.

<sup>42</sup> Hadar, Leon “[Dangerous Manichean Foreign Policy Narratives](#),” *The National Interest*, 6 September 2016.

of official statements from Washington, while VOA Turkish carries news stories and themed programs in Turkish. Neither provides a forum for live interaction with Turkish audiences. Given the high rate of internet connectedness and social media usage in Turkey, and how much attention Turks devote to discussing U.S. politics and policies, this limited engagement is a significant missed opportunity. U.S. public diplomacy shapers should partner with respected Turkish think tanks, academic institutions, and media to shape online opportunities for dialogue and debate on bilateral issues, and not just engage in one-way messaging.

#10: Promote visuals of the parts of the relationship that are working. Despite top-level political strains, important forms of bilateral cooperation have continued. A conscious effort should be made to advertise such cooperation as relations evolve. These include military, business, and cultural ties. It is easy to overlook such stabilizing cooperation, and formal announcements as well as social media channels should be used to highlight it. Grants should be developed for blogs highlighting and illustrating people-to-people ties, and a forward-leaning media engagement strategy (even with yandaş outlets) should be pursued to integrate positive stories and images into coverage of bilateral relations with regularity. Ultra-nationalists and Eurasianist segments likely have embedded anti-Americanism so deeply into their world view that such coverage will be dismissed as fluff or even ironic, but a broad swath of the Liberal and even pro-AKP audiences still endorse Turkey's Western ties albeit with caveats, and they will be open to anecdotal evidence of continued strategic alignment.

Examples of positive bilateral visuals follow:



[“Incirlik Commemorates Ataturk Day”](#) - USAF photo (Ceaira Tinsley)



[“Turkish President, SpaceX CEO Discuss Cooperation,”](#) Anadolu Ajans (File Photo)



[“U.S. Students Set to Experience Turkish Culture”](#) Turkish Trade News (File Photo)

### *Preserving Options and Building for the Future*

A strategy of attuned messaging and listening despite top-level political tensions faces many obstacles, not all in Turkey. It fights upstream against a torrent of bad news stories (alliance in crisis, clashing interests, democratic backsliding, radicalism, economic mismanagement) driven by both real divergence and a potent anti-Turkish atmosphere in Washington (Congress, think tanks, embassies of regional rivals, frustrated bureaucrats). It competes with skeptical or antagonistic Turkish press. Yet the job of public diplomacy is to preserve options and lay groundwork for enhanced cooperation when conditions permit, so floating downstream with the naysayer chorus is not an option. Employed consistently and patiently, this strategy can serve as a metaphorical canoe to help get us back up stream to steady waters.