

Turkish Exceptionalism in the Transatlantic Community

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Is Turkey drifting away from the West? The 2010 *Transatlantic Trends*, released this week puts into sharp relief Turkey's growing differences from the transatlantic community. Two thirds of Turks, for example, find strong U.S. leadership in world affairs undesirable as compared to around 39 percent of Europeans. Similarly, two-thirds of Turks have an unfavorable opinion of the U.S. (67%), while three quarters of EU citizens (76%) have a favorable opinion of the U.S., but only 22 percent of Turks do.

A wide gap also remains between the Turkish public opinion and that of the EU regarding support for President Obama. The Obama bounce last year saw support for the U.S. president increasing from 16 to 83 percent in the EU, but in Turkey from a low of 8 percent to only 50. The gap remains: 78 percent of EU citizens approve of the way the U.S. President is handling international policies while only 28 of Turks do, despite President Obama's efforts to engage the Turkey and include visits to both Istanbul and Ankara in his first presidential trip to Europe.

Despite President Obama's warm gestures, stark differences on Iran cast a cloud on Turkey's transatlantic relations. Insofar as the Turkish public opinion is concerned, the lack of a threat perception from Iran may explain the differences: only 13 percent of Turks (as compared to 64% of Americans) support military action against Iran, if all non-military options have been tried and only the military option is left to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. On the same question, more than half (54%) of the Turkish respondents accept that Iran could acquire nuclear weapons as compared to 37 percent of EU citizens.

The Turks' loss of confidence in the U.S. leadership (in the aftermath of the Iraq war) is paralleled by views of the EU. Only one in four Turks (27%) finds EU leadership in world affairs desirable, while four out of five (80%) of Americans as well as EU citizens do. More than half of Turkish citizens (55%) have an unfavorable opinion of the EU and only 38 percent think that Turkey's EU membership is a good thing, down from 73 percent in 2004. Interestingly enough, twice as many EU citizens (51%) as Turks (26%) think that Turkey is likely to join the EU, although fewer than one in four EU citizens (22-23%) support Turkey's EU membership.

Turks' loss of confidence in their Western ties is also reflected in their skepticism about U.S. and EU-supported initiatives. While 53 percent of Turks oppose the current negotiations in Cyprus to re-unify the island, only 28 percent support them; more than half of the Turks oppose (56%) the ratification by the Turkish parliament of the protocols signed by Turkish and Armenian governments to open the border between the two countries, while support for the Armenian opening remains at a low 28 percent.

Has the EU's off-putting attitude caused Turkey to change its orientation, as U.S. Defense Secretary Gates claimed after Turkey voted against imposing sanctions on Iran at the UN Security Council last June?

Although Turkey's differences from the U.S. and EU can be said to reflect disappointment with its transatlantic allies, the public opinion does not seem to indicate a strong preference for cooperating with new allies.

Although Turkish support for regional cooperation has doubled from 10 percent since last year, in parallel with the government's emphasis on engaging the neighborhood, still only one in five Turks indicated a preference for "closest cooperation" with the countries of the Middle East. Also, despite rapidly expanding commercial relations and energy deals with Moscow, support for cooperation with Russia remains at a low 5 percent, compared to 6 percent for the U.S.

Rather, the 2011 **Trends** indicate a continued inward orientation, with a plurality (34%, but down from 43% last year) showing a preference for Turkey acting alone, a preference that stands out in contrast to the increasingly activist foreign policy pursued by the government.

The failure of a large proportion of Turks to indicate any preference at all points to yet another striking difference between the Turkish respondents and others. One in five Turks, for example, did not respond to the questions on whether they thought Turkey's relations with Russia and China were good or bad. On the other hand, only 5-7 percent of EU respondents declined to answer the same questions on the EU's relations with the two countries. Even more telling are further examples: 31 percent of Turks did not offer an opinion regarding whether the relations between the EU and U.S. ought to become closer; one in three did not respond to the question on whether they thought China played a positive role in the world stage; and 27 percent declined to state whether they thought NATO was essential for Turkey's security or not. Even on the heady question of preventing Iran from producing nuclear weapons, one in three Turks did not indicate a preference as to whether they supported or opposed military action against Iran.

There is no question of a widening gap between Turkish perceptions and preferences and those expressed by other members of the transatlantic community. A higher proportion of Turks (64%) than EU citizens believe that Turkey has "such different values that it is not really a part of the West:" another surprising expression from a country that is engaged in EU membership negotiations. However, it is not clear whether the Turkish responses reflect disappointment, dejection, skepticism, cynicism, frustration or confusion. The Turks' deeply rooted "lone wolf" syndrome, as reflected by the adage "Turks don't have any friends but Turks," is still very much in evidence, despite the widespread rhetoric of globalization and despite the Turkish government's aggressively activist foreign policy.

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