

The Most Anti-American Nation

Nov 17, 2008



Articles & Testimony

Read this article in Turkish (<http://www.newsweek.com.tr/haberler/detay/20936/En-anti-Amerikan-devlet>)

Dear President-Elect Obama: As you take office, I am enthusiastically watching your desire to win hearts and minds around the world. But I am concerned in particular about Turkey. This nation is the embodiment of what the United States and the West want to achieve around the world. It is predominantly Muslim, yet Western and democratic. But the Turks are vehemently anti-American, so much so that they consistently rank in polls as the most anti-American country in the world. According to the Pew Center's latest poll, only 12 percent of the Turks like the United States -- fewer, even, than the percentage of Pakistanis. Obamania in Turkey will help you change America's image, but given the dismal numbers, I am afraid that might not be enough. Despite the close cooperation with the United States on Iraq, Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) government has taken the easy way, bashing America at home in an attempt to boost its own popularity. But you should not ignore Turkey. Because of its strategic location, Turkey is a key partner to the United States in tackling many foreign-policy challenges. You will need Turkish support and the Turkish base at Incirlik to achieve many of your goals, such as withdrawing troops from Iraq.

So allow me to make some suggestions on tackling anti-Americanism in Turkey. First, do not dismiss the AKP's rhetoric as benign domestic politicking. While an anti-Western statement by a Danish politician could be dismissed as "crazy," and the same statement by an Egyptian might be considered "normal," Turkey is neither Denmark nor Egypt. This is the rare country in which anti-Western statements actually matter because they help shape people's identity. Since the AKP assumed power in 2002, the Turks have not heard anything positive about the West from their leadership. In fact, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan has often lambasted the West, suggesting, for instance, that "the West uses terrorism to sell Turkey weapons" or that "Turkey has borrowed only immoral stuff from the West."

The same attitude holds toward the United States. More than 90 percent of Turks do not read or write foreign languages well, and the AKP leadership is extremely and relentlessly negative toward America, and this is what Turks see in most of the media. When a group of men, all in their 20s, attacked the U.S. consulate in Istanbul in July, the response was not one of compassion or sympathy for America. Rather, almost 20 minutes after the attack, pro-government news outlets started to brim with allegations that the United States was responsible for the deaths of three Turkish cops who were slain by the terrorists. Nobody in the AKP stepped up to the plate to fight negative media spin against the United States.

The effect of this is that millions of young Turks, like the men who attacked the consulate, have seen America only through the AKP's foreign-policy rhetoric, including a very negative spin on the Iraq War. There is now a tsunami of young Turks ready to die while trying to kill Americans. The lesson for you, President-elect Obama, is clear: with such anti-Western rhetoric, and because Turkish attachment to the West is so tenuous, your strategy must be to constantly remind Turks that they belong to the West. You must recognize that while the United States cannot stop this entrenched anti-Americanism altogether, the AKP government can, and you should make this issue a part of your conversation with Ankara. Your policy ought to be zero tolerance toward official anti-American and anti-Western rhetoric in Turkey.

This step should be followed by positive reinforcement. For starters, you must get the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) issue right. Since 2004, the PKK has increased its terrorist attacks into Turkey from American-controlled Iraq. In 2007, the Bush administration started to help Turkey take on the issue by providing Ankara with intelligence support. Now there is an opportunity for you to take that a step further by bringing Iraqi Kurds on board with the United States and Turkey to tackle the PKK. The Iraqi Kurds successfully helped Ankara and Washington fight the PKK in the 1990s, in due course cementing their ties with Ankara. If you engage the Iraqi Kurds to fight the PKK, you will open the path for the Iraqi Kurds and Ankara to build bridges with one another, while helping build the Turks' confidence in the United States as a friend.

But let's be honest. Even with this commitment, Turkish public attitudes toward the United States will change only if the Turkish government adopts positive rhetoric toward America. Until and unless the Turks hear from their government that the United States is a decent country helping them against the PKK -- a fact oddly missing from the AKP's news briefs -- and that Turkey shares values, institutions and interests with America, they will not adopt a favorable disposition toward the United States. In the meantime, America's standing in Turkey resembles a witch burning at the stake. The witch feeling the heat keeps yelling, "I'm not a witch." Of course, the crowd will not believe her unless someone from the crowd steps forward and says the person on fire is not a witch. That someone is the AKP government. I hope that you would ask the AKP to save America from the fire.

Cagaptay is a senior fellow and director of the [Turkish Research Program](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=12&newActiveSubNav=Turkish%20Research%20Program&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D12&newActiveNav=researchPrograms) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=12&newActiveSubNav=Turkish%20Research%20Program&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D12&newActiveNav=researchPrograms>) at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. ❖

Newsweek

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations

Feb 15, 2022

◆
Grant Rumley

(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria

Feb 15, 2022

◆
Anna Borshchevskaya

(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy

Feb 14, 2022

◆
Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)

TOPICS

U.S. Policy (/policy-analysis/us-policy)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Turkey (/policy-analysis/turkey)