

THE HEART OF THE MATTER: THE IMPORTANCE OF EMOTION IN TURKISH- AMERICAN RELATIONS

Practically all of the conflicts between the United States and Turkey, both past and present, can be explained by American lack of sensitivity to Turkish emotional responses and Turkish overreaction to perceived American arrogance. There is a tendency by Turks to focus heavily on their own sense of outrage while downplaying the emotional effects of their own actions. Any discussion of emotion and modern Turkey must begin with the abortive Treaty of Sevres (1920) and the honored Treaty of Lausanne (1923), and American diplomats and political leaders must be thoroughly familiar with both in order to work successfully with Turkey. However, the understanding of the Treaty of Lausanne by the public at large in Turkey is deeply colored by emotion. Emotions arising from religious differences clearly need to be controlled, and religious labels are a poor substitute for an objective evaluation of national interests.

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I am not giving you an order to attack. I am ordering you to die.” Atatürk stated in later years on more than one occasion that he had thoroughly understood the mentality of his Anatolian soldiers. He was able to draw upon their patriotism, sense of honor, and raw emotion to elicit the heights of heroism that were displayed by his troops at Gallipoli. American leaders have too often ignored those same fundamental and magnificent elements in their dealings with Turkey – patriotism, honor, emotion. And Turks have too often allowed those same elements to devolve into something less admirable in their dealings with the United States – nationalism, pride, anger.

Practically all of the conflicts between the United States and Turkey, both past and present, can be explained by American lack of sensitivity to Turkish emotional responses and Turkish overreaction to perceived American arrogance. There is also a tendency by Turks to focus heavily on their own sense of outrage while downplaying the emotional effects of their own actions. I will draw upon a series of key historical events to demonstrate these points.

At the outset, however, I wish to avoid the irony of emotional responses elicited by an article dealing with emotional responses. This article touches upon sensitive issues that need to be brought into the open and discussed much more thoroughly in both Turkey and the United States. I raise them with the greatest of respect and genuine love for both my native country and the country that I now know has provided much of my genetic heritage.

Any discussion of emotion and modern Turkey must begin with the abortive Treaty of Sevres (1920) and the honored Treaty of Lausanne (1923), and American diplomats and political leaders must be thoroughly familiar with both in order to work successfully with Turkey. Against all odds at the end of the First World War, Atatürk rallied his countrymen from the heart of the Turkish homeland and beat back the Western powers that had tried to divide the last remnant of the Ottoman Empire with the Treaty of Sevres—and defeated rebellious minority groups that tried to secede and carve out separate countries from the Anatolian heartland. Consequently, the modern Republic of Turkey was held together in the beginning by the will of Atatürk and a strong nationalism based upon pride in being a Turkish citizen. All other ethnic identification became suspect, and the undeniable ethnic and religious minorities within Turkey have been viewed to this day by many, sadly, as internal threats that might fracture the unity of the state.

Sevres ignited the nationalist movement that led to the foundation of the Republic of Turkey, and Lausanne codified the new country’s borders and international responsibilities. Both treaties lie at the very heart of Turkish national identity, and both are wrapped in such iconographic emotional fervor that they are still referred to on a daily basis in the Turkish media and in political speeches. The problem is that very few people have actually read them, particularly the operative Treaty of Lausanne.

Turkish government leaders have boycotted American diplomatic receptions in honor of Greek Orthodox leaders from the United States because the invitations have referred to his All Holiness Bartholomew as the Ecumenical Patriarch. They fear that the word “Ecumenical” will provide the basis for claims of extraterritoriality in Turkey and subsequent expropriation of Turkish land. Both editorialists and high-ranking politicians have insisted that the Patriarch’s title and status have been fully and finally delineated in the Treaty of Lausanne, and they have invariably referred back emotionally to the Treaty of Sevres to justify their fear of foreign claims on Turkish land. The Patriarchate in Istanbul has been physically attacked as a result of the emotions fanned by the editorialists.

Similarly, when the United States has raised the issue of religious freedom and places of worship for such American Christian denominations as the Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses, their lack of status in the Lausanne Treaty has been mentioned on occasion officially –and frequently unofficially in emotional editorials and political speeches that cite the Eastern Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, and Jewish faiths as the only officially recognized minorities in the Lausanne Treaty.

However, there is no mention at all of the Patriarchate, the Patriarch, or his title in the Lausanne Treaty, just as there is no mention of any specific religious or ethnic minority in the Treaty. The only reference is to “non-Muslim minorities.” Moreover, all such “non-Muslim minorities” are provided with protections in the Treaty that appear not to have been honored in practice. Quite contrary to the fear that the Patriarchate might somehow expropriate Turkish land, it is the property of the Patriarchate, the Armenian Orthodox Church, the Jewish community, and other non-Muslim religious denominations that has been expropriated or controlled by the Turkish government, in apparent violation of the terms of the Lausanne Treaty.

Article 37: Turkey undertakes that the stipulations contained in Articles 38 to 44 shall be recognized as fundamental laws, and that no law, no regulation, nor official action shall conflict or interfere with these stipulations, nor shall any law, regulation, nor official action prevail over them.

Article 40: Turkish nationals belonging to non-Muslim minorities shall enjoy the same treatment and security in law and in fact as other Turkish nationals. In particular, they shall have an equal right to establish, manage and control at their own expense, any charitable, religious, and social institutions, and schools and other establishments for instruction and education, with the right to use their own language and to exercise their own religion freely therein.

Article 42: ...The Turkish government undertakes to grant full protection to the churches, synagogues, cemeteries, and other religious establishments of the above-mentioned minorities. All facilities and authorization will be granted to the pious foundations, and to the religious and charitable institutions of the said minorities at present existing in Turkey, and the Turkish government will not refuse, for the formation

of new religious and charitable institutions, any of the necessary facilities which are guaranteed to other private institutions of that nature.

Those who argue that the phrase “minorities at present existing in Turkey” limits discussion to the Eastern Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, and Jewish faiths neglect to note that the Syriac Christians and other faiths were equally present in Turkey at the time. Nor does it make any difference, since “new religious and charitable institutions” are guaranteed full protection anyway.

Any reference to the minutes of the Lausanne Treaty negotiations is essentially meaningless, except for historians, since it is the Treaty itself that carries the force of law, not the debates that led to the Treaty, and Article 37 confirms the primacy of the Treaty language over any subsequent national law or official action.

The issue of the completely counter-productive closure of the Halki Seminary on Heybeliada in 1971 remains an open sore in Turkey’s international relations, despite the clear right of the Church to “establish, manage, and control” such a school as spelled out in Article 40 and the primacy of Lausanne Treaty rights over national education laws as affirmed in Article 37. Nevertheless, any resolution of the Halki issue and other matters concerning religious minorities appears to lie in the indefinite future, as nationalist emotion and xenophobia stemming from the treaty of Sevres prevent consideration of just solutions by the government.

Regrettably, the problem also extends more broadly to non-religious minorities. For example, meaningful language rights still denied in practice to Turkish Kurds are also fully protected in the Lausanne Treaty:

Article 39: ...No restriction shall be imposed on the free use by any Turkish national of any language in private intercourse, religion, in the press, or in any publications of any kind or at public meetings.

In short, the honored Treaty of Lausanne, which is referred to constantly and emotionally in Turkey as the sacred foundation of the modern Republic, imposes societal obligations on the state that have simply not been met. The “understanding” of the Treaty by the public at large is emotional, rather than rational. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the ongoing problems with the treatment of minorities in Turkey is a direct consequence of the failure of successive governments to honor the requirements of the Lausanne Treaty, and the great irony is that nationalists who refer emotionally to the Treaty for justification of the suppression of minority rights are actually citing the document that enshrines those rights.

Similarly, the very image and memory of Atatürk himself have been expropriated by those who fear their own citizens. Everyone can understand Atatürk’s need to forge unity from division in order to establish and maintain the new Republic under extraordinarily difficult circumstances. Eighty years later, however, few can understand the need to demonize Turkish minorities and even on occasion to deny that they exist. Atatürk

himself, an avid reformer and one of the greatest visionaries of the 20th century, would surely resent his artificial image of stern ultra-conservative as crafted for him by contemporary nationalists. When such elements speak out emotionally against Turkish membership in the European Union because of the social liberalization required by such membership, they are undercutting Atatürk's grand dream of westernization for Turkey and full participation in "contemporary civilization."

Reality has been subverted by emotional shorthand that does not withstand the test of examination. Those who shout "Lausanne" are referring to a document that actually refutes them. Those who loudly invoke "Atatürk" attempt to use his memory as an obstacle to change, although the man himself was the very embodiment of change. Those who deny the existence of "minorities" in Turkey refuse to honor the dictionary definition: "Minority: a part of a population differing from others in some characteristics and often subjected to differential treatment." Oddly, they insist that minorities must be named in the Lausanne treaty in order to exist but have no difficulty locating the Turkomen in Iraq, ethnic Turks in Greece, and even Turkish Americans in the United States.

The task of the United States is to be aware of such emotionalism in Turkey and to acknowledge it in ways that are positive and productive for both countries. For example, the decision to send the body of Turkish Ambassador Mehmet Münir Ertegün home to Turkey in honor aboard the battleship Missouri in 1946 arose not only from a wish to warn the Soviet Union away from Turkey but also from a conscious recognition of the positive impact that the humanitarian gesture would have on the Turkish people.

Such gestures are worth far more than any amount of aid or even political support in terms of strengthening Turkish-American relations. For example, the genuine affection of the Turkish people for Bill Clinton stems not from any policy decisions that he made in regard to Turkey when he was President but rather from the simple human act of picking up a Turkish baby and allowing it to play with his nose when he was visiting the region struck by the devastating 1999 earthquake.

It would not be difficult for the United States to seek out opportunities for such gestures and to include them as a major component of its ongoing relations with Turkey. However, too many American officials focus far more on "hard policy" issues and strategizing than they do on basic human relations and the importance of emotional impact. That is a mistake, particularly in regard to Turkey.

A case in point is the infamous "Johnson Letter" of June 5, 1964. Certainly, it was written in haste, as the United States had been advised that Turkish troops were on the verge of moving on Cyprus, and, just as certainly, it was not written by President Johnson himself, although he approved it. The primary American goals at the time were to prevent a war between NATO allies Turkey and Greece and to forestall any possibility of involvement in the conflict by the Soviet Union. The U.S. succeeded in those aims but at the cost of alienating Turkey and damaging the partnership to such an extent that it never really recovered the initial closeness generated by NATO membership and joint

participation in the Korean conflict. The message itself was tough –do not invade or the U.S. and NATO may not be able to assist if the Soviet Union becomes involved– but the primary damage was done more by the cold and blunt tone of the letter. Greater reliance on “emotional intelligence” and far greater knowledge of Turkish pride and emotional response could have produced a letter conveying the intense American concern without the slap in the face, particularly since the Turkish intervention was motivated by the ongoing violence against Turkish Cypriots and sanctioned by the 1960 Cyprus Treaty of Guarantee.

As a people ruled for centuries by sultans who embodied the state within themselves, and as a people who still rely on the practice of “*torpil*,” or personal “influence at court,” Turks tend to personalize official contacts and international relations. Countries themselves are personified, and the United States has been thought of at times as a friend and brother and at other times as an untrustworthy foreigner and outsider.

There is no more important institution in Turkey than the family, and there are still intricate traditions and customs that rule family relationships. Even the Turkish language testifies to these intricacies, as there are separate words for paternal and maternal grandparents, as well as paternal and maternal aunts and uncles, and even older brothers and sisters, as opposed to other siblings. When the United States has assumed the role of benevolent older brother (“*agabey*”) or even that of a kindly “Uncle Sam,” the relationship has flourished. The Johnson Letter, however, was perceived in Turkey as a completely unexpected and treacherous blow leveled by one brother on another.

There are countless Turkish proverbs attesting to the importance of family and friendship. One of the most peculiarly resonant today follows: “Ana gibi yâr, Bagdat gibi diyar olmaz.” [To a man there is no friend like a brother, and no land like Iraq.] Conversely, when a brother has betrayed his brother, “Kardes degil, kara tas.” [He is not a brother; he is a black stone.]

None of this would have been suspected by President Johnson and his advisors. The letter was meant to be a strong warning between allies about the consequences of Turkish intervention on Cyprus. Instead, it was perceived as a personal affront to Prime Minister Inönü and the Turkish nation, as well as a violation of the norms of friendship and brotherhood, and it remains a black mark on Turkish-American relations to this day.

The contemporary parallel to the outrage felt in Turkey in response to the Johnson Letter has been the intense national reaction to the arrest of Turkish soldiers by American troops in Sulaimaniye, Iraq, on July 4, 2003. It is far too late for facts to moderate the emotional fervor that now surrounds the incident. It has led directly to massive loss of support for the United States in Turkey, and its ripples can be felt in such damaging and emotion-laden works as the film “Valley of the Wolves - Iraq,” in which the Americans are unspeakable villains.

On the other hand, what actually happened in Sulaimaniye? Part of the problem from the beginning has been that only one side of the story ever reached the Turkish public. The

reasons for the American action remain classified, and the full story may only reach the public through future historians. It has been noted, though, that the arrests were conducted to prevent imminent destabilization in the area. A series of questions has never been answered in Turkey or even posed publicly: Who leaked the one-sided story to the Turkish media and with what intent? Why were the Turkish soldiers in civilian clothes and without identification? What were they doing there?

On the American side, ignorance of Turkey and the special role of its armed forces in the national consciousness played a pivotal role. None of the American soldiers directly involved in the arrest would have known that the Turkish military is by far the most respected public institution in the country and that “Mehmet” embodies the honor of the entire nation. Even if the intent were to prevent a serious act of violence, the “bagging” of the soldiers should have been avoided. It does not help to emphasize that handcuffing and bagging are standard procedures when arresting suspected militants in Iraq, as troops from a NATO ally are clearly in a very different category. On the other hand, “troops” do not wear civilian clothes while on duty, and there is a genuine question about whether the American soldiers could differentiate between the Turkish soldiers and anyone else who may have been on their compound.

Emotional response has now rendered all such argument useless. “Sulaimaniye” will remain a burning emotional symbol in the Turkish consciousness of American disrespect for Turkish honor no matter what the facts may be.

In all matters regarding Iraq, however, emotional response is a two-way street, and Turkish commentators and politicians have too often not taken into account American emotions and American honor. With American soldiers dying in northern Iraq in an attempt to prevent further violence and destabilization in the region, is it any wonder that firm action would be taken against any group believed to be undercutting that effort?

It is clearly just as important for Turkish policymakers to understand and respect allied sensitivities and emotional responses as it is for American policymakers to do the same in dealing with Turkey. It would be a mistake to underestimate the belief held by American defense officials that fewer American soldiers would have died in Iraq if Turkey had participated as expected and that the entire complexion of the resistance that followed would have been different if more of Saddam’s military forces had been eliminated in the expected pincer movement from the north.

In addition, one country in particular that might well hesitate to speak about lack of UN authorization for military operations in Iraq is Turkey, because its own military forces have been operating in Iraq without international sanction for many years. The one country that spoke up repeatedly on Turkey’s behalf when it pursued the PKK into Iraq and received international condemnation for it was the United States. American diplomats addressed the international media on the subject on many occasions, noting that the incursions were temporary and limited and that Turkish forces were taking special measures to avoid civilian casualties. The United States also took pains not to

condemn or fault Turkey when it stationed its troops well inside the border of Iraq years ago.

In return, however, Turks on all sides of the political spectrum have condemned the United States for acting in Iraq without additional UN approval (while neglecting to note that the United States and NATO acted both in Bosnia and Kosovo without full UN approval to protect the Muslim populations from genocide). Moreover, some Turkish politicians have accused the United States –not just emotionally but hysterically– of genocide in Fallujah and of targeting civilians in Iraq in general.

Therefore, it is also incumbent on Turkish leaders and opinion-makers to recognize the lasting scars that can deface the Turkish-American relationship when American sensitivities are discounted. A further example of the emotional double-standard: When a handful of American cartoonists satirized Turkey's wish for greater economic support in the lead-up to the vote on the “tezkere,” the entire country became inflamed by the presumed insult, particularly since one of the cartoons depicted a figure resembling the Prime Minister in the guise of a belly dancer with dollar bills sticking out of his belt. The American cartoonists quickly moved on to other subjects, of course, and the furor passed. In Turkey, however, the American President is caricatured mercilessly every day in the Turkish media, either as a bloodthirsty vampire or far worse. Does no one perceive this as an insult in Turkey, or are such things only insulting when directed at Turks?

With the feared clash of civilizations looming on the horizon, Turkey and the United States have a particular responsibility to help dispel it, first and foremost through the example of their own close relations, in addition to their shared history of providing religious sanctuary to oppressed believers. The emotions that arise from religion are the strongest known to mankind. However, the mass murder of innocents committed by suicide bombers in the name of God can only be counted as evil and sinful in every religion despite the religious fervor that may have motivated it. As the Prime Minister noted publicly after the terrible bombs exploded in Istanbul in November of 2003, “Those who bloodied this holy day and massacred innocent people will account for it in both worlds. They will be damned for eternity.”

The future of religion in Turkey will do no less than determine whether the clash of civilizations can be avoided, and it is the ability to channel religious emotion in positive directions that will determine the future of religion. We must first admit that someone who shares our religion in name may very well not share our religion in his heart. When Sunnis and Shiites kill each other in Iraq or Catholics and Protestants kill each other in Northern Ireland, is it possible to believe that any of the people involved actually carry the teachings of Islam or Christianity in their hearts?

Emotions arising from religious differences clearly need to be controlled, and religious labels are a poor substitute for an objective evaluation of national interests. Would the Turkish public's view of the struggle in Iraq be different if a Shiite minority under a bloodthirsty Shiite dictator had been oppressing a large Sunni majority for decades? Are

some in Turkey overlooking terrorist actions or terrorist support tied to Hamas, Hezbollah, Syria, and Iran simply because of the emotional connection to Islam?

What is not in question is that religious passions and religious labels in Turkey have led to brutal acts of murder in recent years. The most infamous has been the attack on a hotel in Sivas in 1993 and the resultant burning to death of 36 people, almost all of them Alevis. It was a violent act of hatred motivated by uncontrolled religious emotion. Turkey is not unique, of course, in its experience with such emotional attacks. We need only think of far worse clashes between Muslims and Hindus in India. And the United States is far from immune from “hate crimes.”

Nevertheless, the geographical and historical position of Turkey at the nexus of Europe, the Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Middle East demands special responsibility in resolving the negative passions driving the conflict of civilizations. There are simply too many instances in Turkey of people charging ahead with murderous intent aroused out of deluded belief and blind emotion. The synagogue bombings in Istanbul connected to al-Qaeda in 2003 were committed by Turkish citizens against Turkish citizens, apparently in the belief that all Jews are Israelis and that all Israelis deserve to die. The attack on the Masonic Lodge in Istanbul that followed on March 9, 2004, again was committed by Turkish citizens against Turkish citizens in the belief that all Masons are Jews and that all Jews should be murdered. The killing of Father Santoro in Trabzon by a Turkish teenager on February 5, 2006 was apparently an emotionally deluded response to the publishing of newspaper cartoons of the Prophet in Denmark.

Emotions run close to the surface in Turkey, and little is needed to provoke an aggressive response. Insults can be detected where none is intended. An admirable sense of honor can too easily be transmuted into raw hatred. Why should the outrage voiced by the Muslim community against the Pope’s thoughtless quotation of a medieval emperor on the subject of Islam have been led by Turkish voices in the international media? Should the Deputy Head of the ruling party in Turkey not have waited a day or two and ascertained the facts of the matter before declaring in public, “He is going down in history in the same category as leaders such as Hitler and Mussolini.”

This is the challenge in Turkish-American relations: American leaders must always remain aware of emotional response in Turkey, and Turkish leaders must always do their best to moderate the tendency to react too fast and too strongly to perceived slights or insults. Otherwise, the enormous potential for positive international action that is inherent in the Turkish-American relationship will be forever limited and stunted.

American leaders cannot hope to match the brilliant understanding of the Turkish people demonstrated by Atatürk. But they can and should be aware of the all-important emotional connections between friends and allies. Turkish leaders should forgive the periodic emotional blindness of their American counterparts and seek out the ties of abiding friendship that connect our two great nations: “Gönülden gönüle yol vardır.” [There is always a path from one heart to another] That is the heart of the matter.