

By Yavuz Baydar

Coverage of US foreign policy has always occupied a large space in Turkish press. In my capacity as readers representative in past 8 + years I have had to experience the patterns of how this policy and Turco- American relations were reported, interpreted and consequently perceived by the public.

Even my shift, against my will, from daily Milliyet to daily Sabah had to do directly with US policy, specifically what Condi Rice recently called Iraqi Kurdistan. Sloppy reporting can harm even the position of ombudsmen in Turkey, we have experienced.

It is apparent that we in the press are witnessing signs of all time lows regarding public perception of the USA for some time now. As the conflict in Iraq goes deeper, as what public interprets White House position vis a vis Iraq as aggressive policies, as conflict in Palestine shows no signs of loosening, this mass perception might even thicken, depending on the intensity of troubles in the Middle East.

Anti-Americanism, which I tend not to use in the context of mass perceptions in Turkey, because it is a term in my opinion, that defines a certain worldview of extremism and radicalism worldwide, has been rooted as actual anti American Administration policies for a long time in Turkey and that we know.

It has begun, to go back a little, weakly as the political and radical left gained ground in the sixties and also spread into the ranks of the army, particularly with the Johnson letter in 1964. While the legal and illegal leftist movements argued on all major issues on the wrongs of what they see as American Imperialism, the mechanisms of the Cold War helped contain the skepticism among the officers and commanders against the White House.

Semi coup in 1971, the real coup in 1980 and, I would argue, the increased cooperation with Israel before and after the post modern coup in 1997 greatly contributed to the negative sentiments, spreading further to all possible segments of the society. American involvement, as it was seen in Turkey and Greece, into the domestic developments mainly in order to interrupt fragile processes within the framework of pluralism, plus all the observation of similar interventions elsewhere in the world has cemented the sentiments. Another particular point for Turkey was, ever since the real coup in 1980, what the secular republicans in Turkey has noted with discontent, over and over, that the White House was sowing truly bad seeds by engaging deeply conservative, feudal tribes in the war against the Soviet troops in Afghanistan. Many people blame the USA for all the evil in the name of religious fanaticism and violence today.

Another factor, although weaker, to be linked with the USA later, later than the Europeans in general, was the emergence of the PKK, as a form of violent ethnic separatism. It has to do with formations following the first Gulf War: As the no fly zone was established over mainly Kurdish Northern Iraq, and as the domestic resistance increased against Turgut Özal's policies of dialogue with Kurdish leaders in the region, we saw a stiffening stand against what many people again perceiving these developments as a well-designed American plan to establish a free independent Kurdistan. Meanwhile, two other developments helped feed the conservative Sunnite, Islamist segments of the society with anti - Americanism (here I use the term more freely): Bloody Balkan wars, local battles with acts of genocide against the Bosnian, later Kosovar Muslims and the what these people saw with fury as an increasing, inhuman harassment of the Palestinians. Mind you, anti White House sentiments meanwhile had led some secular press segments in Turkey to oppose any American involvement to end the war, based on old enmities and suspicions.

Then, toward the end of 90's, Turkey and United States had the revival of the good old days. Clinton Administration's active role in ending the war in Balkans were welcomed, its

helping hand to capture Abdullah Öcalan helped disperse a lot of the old suspicions that Americans were behind vicious Kurds to divide Turkey, and naturally, Clinton family's visit to Turkey with child kissing and so on after the earthquake in and around the Izmit Bay. By the end of 1999, and in 2000, most of the Anti White House and some of the religious based anti – Americanism had gone away.

Most of it. Not all of it. Because we had a development, that would fade for a while, but come back to haunt us, what some large staunch secularists see as a new American plan against Turkey: Fethullah Gülen, who defines himself and his movement as an alternative modernist Islamic movement as an alternative to what he sees as Arabism of Necmettin Erbakan and his followers, was forced to live in the USA, because of the investigations conducted during and after 1997 post modern coup. We will come back to that.

But a new spring in the perceptions would not last long in Turkey.

First came the attacks in 9/11, which sort of dragged some considerable segments of the political Islam and various Sunnite segments into joining a) the suspicions that it was a Jewish plot, b) the joy that this infidel power had a huge slap in the face. We saw a lot of different expressions on those two fields. One big kerosene in the fire was Bush's famous remark on "starting a crusade". To this day I am sure that it has left the deepest scar in the psyche of those who reacted to this. Naturally, how Bush and Cheney and their staff reasoned and projected the ways to deal with the prisoners, later in Guantanamo, was a big instrument for spreading further anger at US policies.

The key to much of today's atmosphere in Turkey is, of course, lies in how both countries administrations and medias handled the issue of the so called resolution of March 1st. As you recall, this resolution would allow American troops to have access and passage of Turkish soil on their way into Northern Iraq and down plus logistic support. Things went wrong, both from American perspective and now, today I learn, even from Turkish government's perspective.

Today, in Milliyet, our distinguished colleague, Sedat Ergin, in a large analysis, clarifies what went wrong. The plans were ready, everything was set for signatures on the table, as one FM official told me, on the map there would be five fingers and one of them would belong to Turkey. Military was to a large extent for the resolution. Today's chief of general staff, Yaşar Büyükanıt, then number two in general staff, was for it. The only opposed were army and gendarmerie wing commanders. AK Party, in reluctance, had deliberations. Erdoğan was not PM then, it was Gül. While some powerful Sunnite sect leaders

Pushed Erdoğan in order to not pass the bill "to help kill our Muslim brothers", some cabinet members warned Gül of the severe consequences if the bill not passes. With the pressure from media also increasing, Islamist media opposing and mainly leftist-Kemalist segments in secularist media also fiercely against an American invasion, Erdoğan and Gül, took a critical view. They wanted to deal with the bill in NSC, with the commanders whom they knew would support it, and hoped that they would come out and say so. NSC has left it open, because commanders backed down on the resistance that stemmed from president Sezer and the military did not come out and say that they were in favor. Just on the opposite, one of the top commanders, remaining anonymous, gave an interview to Milliyet a day or two before, saying the army was against it. This has added to the confusion and parliament could not gather enough votes to pass the bill. You know the hell it has raised, and to this day it is an open wound. Erdoğan, in the latest interview, the day before yesterday, finally acknowledged, that it was a big mistake not to pass it.

Then came the invasion and occupation of Iraq. This decision and its conduct had the greatest impact on the mental landscape here, on various levels: To a large segment of

faithful, but passive and rather introverted Sunnite segments, represented now by a new party which calls itself as Muslim Democrats, saw with growing discontent the ill treatment of Iraqis and the fierce rhetoric that dominated the world scene, depicting Bush as fiercely anti-Islamic rather than anti-fanatic.

One element that has now come forward, in the context of Anti-Bushism if you like, is the developments in Iraq and North in particular. As far as we can see, the current government has no big problems to deal with the domestic Kurdish issue and Iraqi Kurdistan possibility issue. To the silent majority of Sunnites, mainly the voters of AK Party, it does not seem to be a to-be-or-not-to-be issue either. But, what now threatens to deteriorate the already poisoned mental climate in Turkey is how powerfully evocative the prospect of a free Kurdistan and an attempt for a violent secession has been amongst the republican elite, secular and Turkish identity conscious middle classes have been. Already badly strained by the pace of reforms in the EU process, fatigued and also infuriated by the major debates, there has been an ongoing shift now in Turkey towards a non-compromising nationalism, that has shown deadly hiccups. EU project de facto on hold, the deepening war of words between Kurdish leaders and rough challenges by domestic Kurds do have a driving force. The more Iraq moves into a partition, the more glide into Anti-Americanism can be expected. It will effect, to what extent we don't know, the outcome of the elections as well.

Today, it is fair to say most of the Turks feel Americans have messed it up real. Their way of seeing the things are simple: White House, under Bush, favours Israel, will do nothing there; now they also favour Kurds. God knows what happens if they also attack Iran. Meanwhile Turkey's Kurds are also negative towards USA: They feel that they were betrayed in Öcalan affair and their cause will be ignored totally with the help of Americans.

On the other hand, we all know that Turkish army and most of the media felt relieved when Saddam was gone. It is not what, it is how things were done that has infuriated the Turkish elite. Turkish mind is driven and changed by quick emotions, that we know for sure:

If the Turks, on all segments, start feeling assured that USA means serious business with the issues in the Middle East, a lot of the bad air might go away quickly. In other words, observations in our profession tell me, that the USA should forget what happened in March 1, 2003, should show that it has forgotten; Turks should be made more secure to shape the future of Iraqi Kurds, and but most important of all, again, the USA and EU must quickly find a solution on the Palestinian issue.

Thank you.