



# TURKEYSCOPE

INSIGHTS ON TURKISH AFFAIRS

**Editor: Dr. Hay Eytan Cohen Yanarocak**

**Vol. 3, No. 3, December 2018**

## **The Rise and Fall of Turkish Soft Power**

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Turkey was recognized as an emerging regional actor over a decade ago. Its economy was recuperating, along with other emerging nations of the ‘Global South.’ Judicial and political reforms that were introduced at that time positioned Turkey as a spearheading model for democracy in the Middle East. During this time, Turkey took advantage of the international demand for a moderate voice in the Middle East. Western nations praised the Turkish model which gave way to Turkey’s aspirations in the Middle East. This era is marked by Turkey’s more assertive foreign policy in the Middle East situating itself as a neutral arbiter enjoying relatively good relations with its Arab neighbors while at the same time maintaining trade and political ties with Israel.

Turkey was on the rise, not only in the Middle East, but also globally. It was a prominent member of NATO, a founding member of the UN alongside several other international platforms, and was a candidate for the EU. The late 2000s marked the zenith of Turkey’s global reputation and is recalled as an era of reform. During the same time period, Turkey embarked on a charm offense mission to change its reputation from a hard power nation to one that emphasized non-military engagements. Soft power became popular among Turkey’s political elite who recognized that Turkey would not be able to achieve its aspirations without it. To this end, Turkey’s public diplomacy apparatus was established at this time and became a staple of Turkish foreign policy. The catalyst behind Turkey’s soft power was the story of Turkey’s success itself. In other words, Turkey had an appealing story to tell that compelled many other countries to admire its progress. Turkey was applauded as an emerging actor, a

nation with growing soft power capacity, a budding democracy and an island of stability in an unstable region.<sup>1</sup>

Nonetheless, Turkey's period of experimentation with soft power was rather short lived, as was its appeal to Western audiences. Turkey's international allies have been vocal about the gradual eradication of checks and balances throughout the terms of consecutive AKP governments, and particularly so after the polarizing 2011 elections. Starting with the Arab Spring in 2011, and then followed by the Gezi Park protests, Turkey took a major hit to its reputation as a Middle Eastern democracy. By 2013, Turkey had lost its neutral position in the Middle East and, following the infamous Mavi Marmara incident, had deeply strained its relations with Israel.

But 2013 was just the beginning of Turkey's image problems. Continuous restrictions on social media<sup>2</sup>, crackdowns against the opposition, journalists and the judiciary system have all contributed to Turkey's dwindling image ever since. Turkish policymakers frequently accuse the West, foreign powers or interest lobbies of hurting Turkey's image.<sup>3</sup> Often times, they use anti-Semitic tropes in rallying the masses against an imaginary bogeyman. This excessive paranoia hardly resonates with the international community. If anything, it further paints a picture of Turkey as a nation driven by conspiracy theories rather than by its once shining image.

In the 1990s, [a popular ad campaign for the soft drink Sprite](#) claimed that 'Image is nothing.' In contrast, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century image is everything. Today, we live in an inter-connected and digitally engaged world, where image and branding are central to nations efforts to boost their international standing and to keep crises at bay. Policymakers and diplomats around the world recognize that perceptions held by others are influenced by a nation's own words and actions. These perceptions then can help advance a nation's interests in the international arena or can entirely damage its reputation. The need to advance interests leads policymakers to direct their attention to strategies that will help them to gain global presence in a world where information overload has become the new reality. Together with the advancements in communication technologies and the speed in which information is exchanged, the need to maintain a globally recognized national image and reputation have become more vital in shaping a nation's global brand. Images of nations depend on preconceived perceptions, existing interactions, actions and discourse. On the other hand, reputation is about credibility, which is the result of actions and images. While it is very difficult to manage, maintain and improve reputation, it is very easy to damage it; harm can be wrought in one single move.

Due to the speed and accessibility of communication technologies, reputation is interconnected to image more than ever. To be sure, despite commendable public diplomacy efforts, Turkey is largely a victim of its own policies in both the domestic and international arenas. Turkey's domestic policies and confrontational foreign policy rhetoric damage Turkey's image in the short term, and in the long term help to gradually build an undesirable reputation as a regional bully. The Turkish example demonstrates that no public diplomacy can save bad policies on the ground and that soft power is vulnerable to reputation.

The major blow to Turkey's image in the West comes from its troubled relations with European countries and with the United States. While continuously accusing European countries of meddling in Turkey's affairs, the Turkish political elite has been outright hostile to the United States, going so far as to accusing the US of plotting a coup against Turkey.<sup>4</sup> During the height of Turkey's regional and global engagement, relations with the United States were not without problems, but the partnership between the two countries remained strong.

Following the failed coup attempt, for which the Turkish government held the Gülenist network (FETÖ) responsible, US-Turkey relations deteriorated significantly. The Turkish government requested that the US extradite Gülen, a request which as of the present time has not borne fruit. Turkey's decision to purchase the Russian S-400 missile defense system continued to strain relations with the US and NATO allies. In 2017, Turkey and the US engaged in a diplomatic row which came as a response to the imprisonment of American staff and which resulted in a reciprocal visa ban. US cooperation with the Syrian-Kurdish YPG, which Turkey considers to be an offshoot terrorist organization of the PKK, has long been causing a rift between the two countries. Finally, the imprisonment of American pastor Andrew Brunson and the concomitant imposition of US sanctions on Turkey were perhaps the last straw. With this latest incident, Turkey was once more put on the spot for imprisoning Brunson, which also fueled the arguments of those criticizing the current state of religious freedom in Turkey. Many of these issues are still outstanding and their recurring coverage in international media has not been favorable for Turkey.

It would be fair enough to say that Turkey's image and reputation have taken a toll in the last five years since the consolidation of power in the hands of the president. Given its current ranking by both Freedom House and Reporters Without Borders (RSF) as amongst the least free nations<sup>5</sup>, at the present time Turkey is almost bereft of the ability to exert soft power in the West. It is no surprise that Turkey's global image is suffering tremendously and this

image problem translates itself to Turkey's self-inflicted isolation in the international arena alongside the likes of Maduro's Venezuela and Central Asian countries ruled by authoritarian leaders.

On an institutional basis, Turkey still remains in the Western camp and is greatly integrated in international organizations. It has shifted its approach from soft power to hard power by investing in military operations and deployments outside of Turkey, and in the defense industry. Therefore, soft power and concerns over how the rest of the world sees Turkey have long been on the back burner. While Turkey's image remains unfavorable and its reputation damaged in the West, by its incremental strategy the Turkish government is using the recent Khashoggi affair to salvage its global image. Turkey hopes to seize an opportunity amid this tragedy and restore its global image as a 'righteous' nation. As the US intelligence agencies have confirmed the Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad Bin Salman's responsibility in the murder,<sup>6</sup> Turkey's response to the Khashoggi incident has provided an unprecedented window for Turkey to get back to its geopolitical ambitions and slowly re-shift its focus to soft power. At the same time, while Turkey's commendable response to Khashoggi's murder can positively influence its global image in the short term, this will hardly be enough to recover its tarnished global reputation. Without having established credibility, Turkey's gambit on the Khashoggi incident will not go far from what public diplomacy scholar Robert Kelley call 'public diplomacy during a crash landing' if it is not accompanied by actual policy changes on the ground.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> "Türkiye'ye Evet", Hürriyet, December 16, 2014, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/dunya/turkiyeye-evet-281670>

<sup>2</sup> İhsan Günay Çağrı, "Twitter kapatıldı", Milliyet, March 21, 2014 <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/twitter-kapatildi-gundem/detay/1854857/default.htm>

<sup>3</sup> Serkan Demirtaş, "Gezi ve AKP'nin uluslararası imajı", BBC Türkçe, May 31, 2014 [https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler/2014/05/140531\\_gezi\\_dispolitika](https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler/2014/05/140531_gezi_dispolitika)

<sup>4</sup> "Darbe girişiminin arkasında ABD var", Yeni Şafak, July 17, 2016, <https://www.yenisafak.com/gundem/darbe-girisiminin-arkasinda-abd-var-2495442>

<sup>5</sup> "Turkey," 2018 Freedom in the World Index, Freedom House. Available at <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2018/turkey>; "2018 World Press Freedom Index," Reporters Without Borders, available at <https://rsf.org/en/ranking#>

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<sup>6</sup> Julian E. Barnes, “C.I.A. Concludes That Saudi Crown Prince Ordered Khashoggi Killed,” New York Times, November 16, 2018. Available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/16/us/politics/cia-saudi-crown-prince-khashoggi.html>