

The World's Vote  
The View from Turkey  
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**T**he predominant Turkish view of the current U.S. election campaign has been formed out of a singular shift in attitudes toward the United States. For most of the past sixty years the United States has been considered a close ally and a social model for Turkey. Until fairly recently, anti-Americanism had cachet here only for the marginal Left and even more marginal radical Islamists. No longer. With the Soviet threat gone, Turks felt more secure, but it was the Iraq war that really turned the tide. Like many others around the world, most Turks regarded the war as an unjust aggression driven by the lust for oil or other hidden goals. Worse, the war liberated Iraqi Kurds and raised the specter of an independent Kurdistan that would threaten Turkey's territorial integrity. Turks worried about America's (much exaggerated) "Kurdish card", and with the relentless press focus on Guantánamo, Abu Ghraib and "rendition", President Bush soon became a hated figure in league with his neoconservative advisers.

That's why most Turks who follow American politics favor the anti-Bush, the candidate they think most likely to adopt a less belligerent foreign policy—a president, for example, who will not bomb Iran. About a year ago, many Turks hoped Hillary Clinton would be this awaited leader, seeing her as the continuation of the Bill Clinton era, a problem-free time in Turkish-American relations. At the time, Obama was little noticed. But as he came ever closer to securing the Democratic nomination, Turkish media started to focus on him, sometimes with hope, usually with an indifference linked to the negative image of the American government that has become established in Turkey. The radical Left has always been anti-American, but it now has company in the Turkish Right, which has developed a xenophobic narrative that casts any non-Turkish entity, even the soft-power European Union, as perilous. Even many staunchly secularist Kemalists now abhor the United States because they believe the bizarre conspiracy theory that the Americans want to establish a "moderate Islamic Republic" in Turkey.

These various fears seem to be firmly rooted, so a simple change of president will not turn Turkish public opinion back to the friendly tilt of the pre-Bush era. That must be why, according to a recent Pew study, only about 20 percent of Turks expressed trust in Obama (still much higher than McCain's 5 percent).

The Turkish media, it must be said, is nonetheless fascinated with Obama, and a few pundits, such as the influential political commentator Cengiz Çandar, have expressed support and sympathy for him. McCain has some sympathizers; too, among upscale nationalist Turks whose main concern is how the U.S. Congress and the White House will define the tragic events of 1915, which the Armenians call genocide. Republicans have traditionally been closer to the Turkish position that these events were not genocide but inter-communal violence, whereas Democrats have voiced more sympathy for the Armenian narrative.

The secularism-versus-religion divide in Turkey also shapes views here on Obama and McCain. Although the current Justice and Development Party (AKP) government led by

Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan has garnered support and praise from most Western governments and intellectual circles, some American neoconservatives have expressed alarm about the “Islamism” of this government, a view in line with the attitude of Turkey’s hard-line secularists, a.k.a. Kemalists. So people speak here about a neocon-Kemalist “axis.” Along with the “Armenian problem”, that would incline the Kemalist establishment to sympathize with the Republican side.

Another doubt about the Obama team came with the Vice Presidential selection of Joe Biden, who is seen, rightly or wrongly, as a “pro-Kurdish” politician who has favored a rapid withdrawal from Iraq that would leave behind an independent Kurdistan. Moreover, while only a handful of Turks were happy with the occupation of Iraq, now more of them are concerned that a sudden withdrawal would lead to further instability. At the end of the day, then, Turks see American politics against the backdrop of their own politics. Turks care who wins, even if mostly for all the wrong reason.

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