

CHANGING DIASPORA POLITICS OF TURKEY AND PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

Turkey's policies towards Turkish citizens who emigrated to Europe as guest workers from the early 1960s onwards incurred a first phase of change in the early 1980s. Another change of policy has been marked in the past decade, with the Turkish government's more active efforts to develop ties with Turkish communities abroad. Institutional infrastructure set up to this end aims to establish a Turkish diaspora with common reflexes, in tune with the interests of Turkey and influencing the politics of their host countries. However there have also been cases in which Ankara's interference in affairs involving the Turkish community in third countries has caused controversy. The Turkish Prime Minister's messages to the Turkish community in Germany and the mobilization of Turkish diaspora against genocide recognition bills in France are two such examples.

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On a cold and rainy Paris afternoon in December 2011, a big and vibrant crowd gathered in front of the French National Assembly. Police built barricades to protect the sumptuous building of the French democracy. The demonstrators were Turks with migration backgrounds, coming from all parts of France and neighboring countries. In part, they were mobilized by Turkish associations and were carrying Turkish flags and protest banners in their hands. They were demonstrating against a legal proposal put forward by some members of the French parliament. Their demonstration was understandably welcomed, if not initiated by, the Turkish government. If the parliament accepted the proposal, any objection against or denial of the claims of genocide against Ottoman Armenians during the First World War would be recognized as a criminal act. Similar legislation had passed in Switzerland a few years earlier. The Armenian lobby in France became very active in 2011 with the support of then French President Nicolas Sarkozy, who was a resolute opponent of Turkish accession to the European Union. The French Parliament agreed upon the proposal, leaving the demonstrating Turks in despair.

The indirect involvement of the Turkish state in organizing and directing this protest is only one example of how the Turkish state is attempting to get involved and to influence Turkish policy issues through its community abroad. Increasingly, members of the Turkish diaspora throughout the world play an active role –most often in compliance with the Turkish state’s point of view– in response to issues, such as this example of politics over Ottoman Armenian history, deemed important to the Turkish state. This article examines the evolution the concept of *diaspora* and the history of Turkish policies towards its citizens who migrated for economic purposes. Over the past fifty years, the Turkish state’s policies and attitudes towards its community abroad has changed from one primarily focused on economic issues in Turkey to one focused on shaping desired foreign policy goals.

Turkish Migration to Europe

The concept of diaspora has generally been used in the Turkish language only with respect to former Ottoman ethnic groups like Armenians, Greeks, and Jews who emigrated to Europe and the Americas during the turbulent 19th century. The current political engagement of some of these groups on Turkey-related issues is generally perceived as animus against Turkish interests. Therefore, the concept of “diaspora” has been loaded with a negative content from the Turkish perspective.

Turkish citizens, who immigrated to Europe within the “guest worker system” from the early 1960s onward and created a permanent resident community in the course

of the last 50 years, were never referred to as a “diaspora” by the Turkish state. These labor migrants and their descendants are, for the Turkish state authorities, solely Turks abroad, or, as used in the daily vernacular, expatriates (*gurbetçiler* in Turkish). Accordingly, Turks, who live and work in foreign countries were by and large always anticipated to return to their home country at some uncertain time and not to settle permanently in the receiving countries. Turks migrated to Germany half a century ago, not as permanent settlers but as wage earners with the intention of a brief sojourn to be able to accumulate some savings that would secure a better life for them in Turkey.

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This intention proved to be a utopian vision for most migrants. The labor conditions were particularly arduous for the Turkish migrants. They were supposed to return as soon as they achieved the expected advantage from their labor. But as the savings and newly developed skill sets did not accrue as quickly as expected, their sojourn became longer and longer. Consequently, the Turkish labor migration to Europe turned out to be a real immigration process over the course of time, including not only the workforce itself but also their family members, who joined their spouses or parents in the receiving countries. Turkish migrants built families, established associations, enterprises and displayed a diasporic formation over the course of time. They became permanent settlers, whose parents and grandparents were originally recruited as temporary workers. This new phenomenon was indeed not recognized immediately by the government authorities of both sending and receiving countries. The receiving countries’ policies insisted on keeping the guest worker paradigm until very recently, without taking lived circumstances into account.

Turkish Standpoints: Remittances and Return

In the first two decades of labor migration, the Turkish authorities were in a state of ambivalence. Their politics and policies regarding Turkish migrants were of a “selective, variable, contingent, contested, and revocable nature.”¹ Turkish governments primarily put the remittances of the workers abroad on the top of their political priorities agenda. The troubled balance of payments and inveterate

1 Rogers Brubaker and Jaeun Kim, “Transborder Membership Politics in Germany and Korea,” *Archives Européennes de Sociologie, [European Journal of Sociology]*, Vol.52, No.1 (January 2011), p. 21-75, <http://works.bepress.com/wrb/27>

economic crisis understandably coerced the politics to concentrate on the financial dimension of labor migration.

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Governments argued and acted from the 1980s onward that the Turks abroad should simply be interconnected with Turkey and the Turkish culture to preserve their ethnic and cultural identity. At the same time, the growing oppositional streams from the far-left and right –which found a free sphere of activity in the liberal political atmosphere of the receiving countries– concerned the Turkish governments and led Ankara to conceive of the situation of Turkish migrants with security arguments. Nevertheless, their real interest stayed within the framework of economic advantage.

In 1982, Turkey’s nationality legislation was amended and double citizenship was facilitated for Turkish citizens who wanted to also retain the host country’s nationality. This major change may be assessed as a milestone in Turkish politics regarding its citizens abroad. The major concern was to enhance the empowerment of their co-ethnics in the receiving countries by achieving a profound legal status and simultaneously establishing or sustaining ties with the “homeland” state. Turkey’s policies were intended to preserve strong ties between the Turkish communities abroad and Turkey. Dual citizenship with the “dual loyalties” were unfamiliar to Turkey until then but were a useful new tool. On the other hand, the 1982 Constitution reflected –for the first time in a constitution– an emphasis on maintaining stronger ties of the Turkish migrants to Turkey and underlined the duties of the state within its competencies for the improvement of these ties.²

Relevant Turkish authorities had attempted to meet the administrative and information/orientation needs of the Turkish citizens abroad since the very beginning of the labor migration. Turkish consulates in all receiving countries offered new forms of service – such as assisting Turkish citizens in the fields of labor and social issues, educational problems, and legal status in the receiving countries. Such service proved to be more effective in comparison with services in the home country.

² Article 62 of the Turkish Constitution.

The recent dramatic global improvements in communication and transportation facilitated and increased interactions of transnational networks and their growing influences on identities. Loyalties and behaviors strengthened the idea that Turkish emigrants should be analyzed in a different manner. Their humanitarian needs as well as global transnationalism were influential factors. The descendants of the former guest workers of the 1960s and 1970s are now bearing increasingly salient multiple diasporic identities, a situation not foreseen or reckoned by the relevant government authorities and even the migrants themselves.

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Transnational Shift in Politics

These developments urged the Turkish governments to introduce new policies from the 1980s onward. Turkish governments, at first under Prime Minister Turgut Özal in 1984-85, paid special attention to the politicization of the Turkish communities abroad that was in line with revised Turkish foreign policy objectives. Turkish associations and mosques/*masjids* in host countries enjoyed partial government support and Turkish consular and diplomatic missions became active in increasing their interactions with their fellow citizens. In 1985, the Turkish government initiated the establishment of a religious organization, Turkish-Islamic Union of the Religious Affairs (DİTİB),³ in the Federal Republic of Germany under the auspices of the Presidency of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı* in Turkish). A similar structure with the same name was established in Austria, Belgium, France, and in other European receiving countries in the course of the following years. Today, more than 1000 mosque associations are affiliated with DİTİB in Germany and therefore constituting the largest Turkish diaspora organization.

There had been a massive increase in state involvement of migration issues in those receiving countries whose governments and ruling elites were not interested in cooperating with the sending country's policy goals for education, rights, and addressing other social problems. Turks with a migration background in Europe largely

³ See official website: www.ditib.de

identify themselves as ethnic/national Turks. Consequently, receiving countries' growing complaints of alleged "integration unwillingness" among the Turkish community has become one of the highly debated issues in the continuing integration debate which is too often framed around a cultural approach. Religion-based identity matters remain on top of the agenda in the migration and migrant policies of the receiving countries in Europe and, since the events of 9/11, ethnic/national belongings seem to be secondary, if not insignificant. Muslim identity as an all-inclusive identity has recently supplanted earlier ethnic markers of difference.

Since the advent of AKP control, Turkish governments have pursued a policy of closer ties with the Turkish communities abroad. Among measures taken to this end, the most dominant is the granting of the right to vote in Turkey's parliamentary elections for Turkish citizens residing abroad. Another significant administrative/structural step was the establishment of a new government institution to tackle the problems of Turkish citizens, expatriates, and communities of Turkish descent throughout the world. This new agency, Presidency for Turks Abroad and Kin Communities (YTB)⁴ is affiliated to the Prime Ministry and has strategic commitments to establish a reliable and reputable Turkish diaspora with common reflexes with the ability to determine in socio-economic, cultural, and political fields in the host countries and on the global level to build an institutional infrastructure hitherto. This structure should aim at the improvement of political consciousness that will enhance qualified political participation, contributing simultaneously to the political, cultural, economic, and social life as well as to closer interactions between diaspora and Turkey on the one hand and between Turkey and the host countries on the other.

The YTB completed the formation of its organization very recently and tries to be active in many fields that were mostly untouched by the state in the past. Academics, civil society and all relevant state agencies are involved in these activities. The minutes of a recent workshop, organized by the YTB in Antalya, with the participation of the members of the Turkish diaspora from all continents, indicate that there was a great enthusiasm among the participants for the formation of necessary structures.⁵

Another structural innovation in this respect has been the establishment of Yunus Emre Institutes for Turkish cultural diplomacy.⁶ Similar bodies such as the *Goethe-Institut*, *Istituto die Studi Italiani*, and the British Council served as models for the first ever attempt of Turkey to promote its cultural assets abroad. Currently, 25

4 See official website: www.ytb.gov.tr

5 "Ortak Akıl Platformu Çalıştayı," [Workshop of Common Mind Platform], *Prime Ministry of Republic of Turkey Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities*, 11-13, January, 2013 in Antalya.

6 See official website: www.yunusemreenstitusu.org

Yunus Emre Cultural Centers are active, addressing foreign audiences to promote mutual understanding through intensive cultural interactions. This new institute also aims to build bridges to the Turkish diasporic formations in the host countries. Teaching the Turkish language to a young generation of Turks abroad with a migration background seems to be one of the leading tasks of the Yunus Emre Institutes.

In recent years, Prime Minister Erdoğan and other government members paid several visits to Turkish migrants in receiving countries, generally Germany, to address fellow citizens in large scale organizations. After each event, the German media criticized the Turkish government's point of view on integration and assimilation, and the focus on education in Turkish language. Germany, as the biggest receiving country of the Turks, has shown aversion with Turkish intervention in regards to the Turkish community. Furthermore, Turkish authorities expressed their concerns on the neo-Nazi violence against Turks in rather strong language. Recent debate regarding the court decision that the Turkish media would not be given access to observe the trial against a neo-Nazi terror suspects triggered a great anxiety in both Turkey and Germany. Turkish authorities and diaspora organizations as well as German politicians and media criticized the attitude of the court in Munich.⁷

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Like in many other cases, Turkish state institutions' involvement in issues concerning Turkish communities in host countries becomes inevitable. Globalization has enhanced transnational mutual interference, which facilitates dialogue and understanding beyond the national borders, at least amongst civil society. On the other hand, ethnic lobbying is not welcomed by nation-states that do not desire any interference into their internal politics. This discontentment, however, cannot prevent the agency of migrants and their interactions, influences, and involvements on a national and local level within the transnational arena.

⁷ Deputy Prime Minister Bekir Bozdağ's declaration on NSU trial: “Alman Mahkemesi Ayrımcılık Yapıyor,” [The German Court is Discriminating], *ha-ber.com*, 29 March 2013, http://ha-ber.net/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=22106&Itemid=76

Members of Diaspora: New Public Diplomats

Public diplomacy is a method for states, beyond their classical diplomatic engagement for their citizens abroad, to enhance their national interests through non-governmental channels. Using public diplomacy, nation-states try to persuade foreign audiences, opinion makers, and key elements in the target society. Public diplomacy becomes a part of the nation-states' collaborative diaspora diplomacy to ensure national goals. These goals are mainly directed towards protecting and succeeding the defined national interests, achieving a better image abroad, achieving better and sustainable trade and economic relations, promoting own nation's cultural assets, and reaching mutual understanding and broad dialogue with foreign audiences principally with the support of indigenous NGOs and other civil society elements.

These efforts are semi-conducted and oriented indirectly by relevant government institutions, (such as the Foreign Service or any other governmental body) but the initiative may be taken also by the civil society. In accordance with the aims described by the government, civil society members come into contact, sometimes even independently and directly with their counterparts.

This type of transnational relation should be symmetrical and involve input from all concerned parties. The main objective should be the creation of a dialogue atmosphere and listening to each other's opinions. Credibility and trustworthiness are the indispensable assets within the public diplomacy domain. There is ultimately no space for pejorative propaganda or deception, as audiences in the global information age cannot be deceived easily as before.

There may be a problem of ethical legitimacy in using expatriates as agents for state interest and to influence host countries' politics. Nevertheless, many countries do take advantage of having large groups of their own citizens or ex-citizens in foreign countries with which they have –or could have– unfriendly relations due to conflict of interests.

To Conclude...

From the 1980s onwards, Ankara discovered the necessity of establishing a proximity to its citizens and former citizens, who had become permanent settlers in the migrant receiving countries. The related policy shift which has been taking place over the last three decades, is grounded in the recognition of the emergence of a politically influential Turkish community undergoing a diasporization process abroad. Turkey must now manage this growing transnationalism and interact with

its migrants abroad, rather than creating unrealistic policies without vision.⁸ After four decades of emigration history, Turkey is now trying to recover from its former, inefficient policies. Recent attempts of the government clearly demonstrate that a policy shift has taken place.

Another vital point is the –admittedly covert– political will to engage the diaspora for Turkish causes abroad. The Turkish diasporic diplomacy is being integrated into and entangled with Turkey’s public diplomacy framework. While there is still worldwide ambiguity about the efficacy of public diplomacy methods, almost every nation-state tries to persuade other nations’ audiences to empower its own interests. The notion of public diplomacy should aim towards a better mutual understanding and reconciliation between nations, *via* transnational policies and the participation of the people in the diaspora. The current policy shift by Ankara provides indicators regarding the prospects of Turkey’s transborder relations, both *vis-à-vis* its (former) citizens abroad, and with the states and domestic actors of the receiving countries.

⁸ Lisa Mügge, “Managing Transnationalism: Continuity and Change in Turkish State Policy,” *International Migration*, Vol.50, No.1 (2012).



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