

IMPROVING US-TURKEY RELATIONS THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media has been the leading tool in creating and building universal awareness. Not only can we foster cultural awareness through digital means, but we can strengthen bonds between communities. Today, social media culminates stronger distant communities and offers ready-made solutions to overcome cultural, diplomatic, and business barriers between nations, namely Turkey and the US. As the leading social media network, Facebook has empowered us to forge new connections and build new communities, and plays a critical role in cementing cross-cultural ties.

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Ask yourself: How did you learn about the cultures and people of different countries 20 years ago? Books, TV, the occasional trip abroad if you were fortunate enough? It is hard now to remember how limited our access to information really was before the internet became as embedded into our daily lives as it is today.

In recent years, tech and social media companies have come under a good deal of criticism for various reasons. Despite this, it is worth recalling that our attitudes and beliefs toward the people and cultures of other countries are shaped by knowledge and familiarity. Bridging gaps between different perspectives require one thing above all else: access. To that extent, there's no parallel for what the internet, digitalization, and social media platforms have done to advance this in recent decades.



In my role at Facebook, I constantly witness not only the existing cultural barriers but also the ones that are constructed between our two countries — based largely on a lack of awareness — which serve to create a sense of division or perceived distance. I also witness, on a daily basis, how social media is harnessed to break down those barriers and find common ground where we previously saw clashes of ideas and misunderstandings rooted in ethnocentrism.

Social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram provide more information at our disposal and give direct access to the world than ever before. But in practical terms we should be asking: How do or can they help us overcome cultural barriers — or even improve relations between entire nations of people? In this instance, I will evaluate Turkey and the United States as a case study.

The Turkey-US Relationship

Turkey and the US are two countries with a longstanding relationship —albeit sometimes unsteady —but fundamentally based on common political, security, and economic objectives. Both countries are also bound by membership and shared values of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), which recently celebrated Turkey's 68th year of accession.¹ US-Turkey relations are experiencing a revival of sorts, following the presidents of both countries committing to boost bilateral trade

¹ Muhammet Emin Avundukluoğlu, "Turkey marks 68 years of accession to NATO," *Anadolu Agency*, 18 February 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/turkey/turkey-marks-68-years-of-accession-to-nato/1737604>

up to 100 billion dollars.² An opportunity which I, both as a Board Member of the Turkish-US Business Council (TAIK) and as a business leader in our region for one of America's top tech firms, see as a major opportunity for mutual benefits.

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President Erdoğan and President Trump setting a target of 100 billion dollars for bilateral trade leaves little room for doubt that the leadership of both countries see the other as a lucrative market for bilateral trade. The digital economies of both Turkey and the US will be crucial in achieving that target, as it will break down financial barriers and create seamless interchanges for American and Turkish corporate enterprises.

Social Media's Role in Bridging Divides

While social media platforms amplify opinions that can highlight differences of thought within and between countries, they also lay bare the commonality and shared values that are at the core of our universal humanness. We see this not only in the striking similarity of birthday celebrations, weddings, baby photos, and good times with family and friends all around the world, but also among jokes, viral videos, and memes that translate across languages and borders. In fact, there are even similarities in the way the global community stands together in moments of compassion or grief. We learn of a personal journey or triumph, heroism or tragedy from a thousand miles away, and empathize with it. We learn of a suffering on a tragic scale and express our support from far away. This is why we can easily say that social media brings people together around a common cause.

Social Media Use in Turkey & the US

In this new era, a new digital-first generation is coming of age. Young people today are not “adopting” digital technology into their lives, they are growing up with it embedded in everything they do. They know no differently, and live with the assumption that we have always been connected to such a fantastic degree. In the coming generations, people from other countries will seem less and less “foreign” of one another, different viewpoints will — hopefully — be better understood, and geographically distant communities will exist closer together through digitalized

² Office of the Press Secretary, “President Donald J. Trump Is Committed to Direct Engagement and Diplomacy with Turkey,” 13 November 2019, <https://tr.usembassy.gov/president-donald-j-trump-is-committed-to-direct-engagement-and-diplomacy-with-turkey/>

social and commercial exchanges of which entire generations will have experienced their whole lives.

The digital era is bringing unparalleled opportunities, especially for emerging markets such as Turkey. With a population of more than 80 million— the majority of whom live in modernized and urban environments— more and more people enjoy access to social media and are able to communicate globally. One of the many similarities between Turks and Americans is that both are heavily mobile-oriented and actively use social media as a means of mass communication and self-expression in their daily lives. 72 percent of American adults use at least one social media site — Facebook being one of the most-widely used— with a user base most broadly representative of the country’s population as a whole.³ The situation is similar in Turkey. According to We Are Social’s Digital 2020 Report, 81 percent of people over the age of 13 in Turkey use social media regularly.⁴ Moreover, according to Facebook’s own data, more than half of the country’s population has a Facebook account.

With such statistics, it is easy to understand why social media is a ready-made solution to overcome cultural, diplomatic, and business barriers between the US and Turkey. Whether it’s our government decision-makers using social media to conduct digital diplomacy, corporates like Turkish Airlines ensuring their new advertising campaign simultaneously debuts on social media as it airs during the Super Bowl commercial break, or Turkish citizens living in the US keeping in touch with their loved ones back home — social media gives us all a platform to connect across borderless channels like never before.

What the Digital Era Means for Communities

At Facebook, we have witnessed the evolution of social media over the last 15 years and analyzed how, along with Instagram, our platform has become the “digital equivalent of our living rooms”⁵: a place where we connect with friends, family, and colleagues. But while a global social media company like Facebook can help us stay connected with people we already know, it also empowers us to forge new connections, experience different perspectives, and build new communities— including those from well beyond our traditional reach. In the online world, there are no borders to keep people apart.

³ Pew Research Center, “Social Media Fact Sheet,” 12 June 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/social-media/>

⁴ We Are Social, “Digital in 2020,” <https://wearesocial.com/digital-2020>

⁵ Mark Zuckerberg, “A Privacy-Focused Vision for Social Networking,” 6 March 2019, Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/notes/mark-zuckerberg/a-privacy-focused-vision-for-social-networking/10156700570096634/>

“With 68 percent of Turkey’s population at working age, US businesses of all sizes have access to a fast-developing economy and pool of resources.”

This is why we decided to redefine our mission and set a new course to bring “the world closer together and give people the power to build communities.”⁶ We believe in the power of building communities and closing gaps.

We also recognize the responsibility that comes along with building such a powerful platform and how ill-intentioned actors can abuse it for their own benefit. That is why our founder, Mark Zuckerberg, has been honest about the challenges faced by social media companies, like Facebook, in stopping the spread of harmful online content. We are proud to say that we employ 35,000 people worldwide to review content. Our teams, along with our technology, currently suspend more than one million fake accounts per day. We want to deliver something great — connections for and between communities around the world.

Mark once said, “online communities strengthen physical communities by helping people come together online as well as offline, even across great distances.”⁷ There is perhaps no example more poignant than when we see individuals in Turkey who have been diagnosed with a rare disease connect on Facebook with an individual or group of people in the US, confronting the same condition. This type of connection offers a powerful reminder that, as humans, we not only share the same pain but also the capacity for strength and courage. Facebook helps support us through our shared struggles, allows us to learn from one another’s experiences, and creates a space to listen.

Turning a Digital Community into a Digital Economy

There are big opportunities when businesses connect, something I see as important for enhancing Turkish-US relations and supporting economic empowerment in both countries. If you are a business owner from the US, you can use Facebook to access the Turkish market without requiring formal relationships or prior market knowledge, and vice versa. It is “access” for the new era, and it is much more inclusive and

⁶ Sarah Frier and Max Chafkin, “Bringing the World Closer Together,” *Bloomberg*, 22 June 2017, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-06-22/zuckerberg-s-new-mission-for-facebook-bringing-the-world-closer>

⁷ Mark Zuckerberg, “Bringing the World Closer Together,” 22 June 2017, *Facebook*, <https://www.facebook.com/notes/mark-zuckerberg/bringing-the-world-closer-together/10154944663901634/>

open than the world is used to. With 68 percent of Turkey's population at working age, US businesses of all sizes have access to a fast-developing economy and pool of resources.

For Turkey, the full digitalization of its economy has been a major priority⁸ to effectively compete in global markets. Previously, while access to international markets was only possible for big corporations with deep pockets, the impact of digital technologies has transformed the macroeconomic landscape. American and Turkish small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) now have the platforms to promote their brands and expand their customer base in each other's market.

One way we are working with businesses in Turkey to maximize business owner's use of our platform to grow their reach is through the project "Facebook İstasyon". This project was launched last year in the heart of Istanbul's financial district, Maslak, in collaboration with the Turkish Union of Chambers and Stock Exchanges (TOBB) and the Habitat Association. İstasyon helps small businesses and entrepreneurs — many of whose priority market is the US — harness Facebook's tools to reach international markets, access data, and use social media as an effective channel by which to grow their businesses.

15 percent of American Facebook users use the platform to shop. By increasing the accessibility and visibility of Turkish brands in the US and vice versa, platforms like Facebook and Instagram are increasingly accepted as vital channels for reaching new customers and increasing trade between our two countries. Therefore, this rate will continue to increase as we release more features that enable a more seamless customer experience.

As the US and Turkey move toward the 100-billion-dollar trade target, no one doubts that the stimulation of macroeconomic activities between these two countries will enhance the overall relationship as a result of shored up mutual benefits, increased B2B and interpersonal exchanges, and reinforced trust. However, in a world where technology has revolutionized how businesses interact across borders, social media will also play a critical part in achieving all of these aims.

The Long View

Today, more than 1.4 billion people globally are members of Facebook groups. We are the global public square, and we are the place where people can come to see the world through a different lens — through someone else's.

⁸ Ruhsar Pekcan, "Turkey's Trade Strategies in the new Digital Age," *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, 19 March 2019, http://turkishpolicy.com/article/951/turkeys-trade-strategies-in-the-new-digital-age#_ftn1

The power of social platforms for e-commerce and for supporting international trade relations is only going to continue to grow at an increasing pace. Since 2012, e-commerce volume in Turkey has increased by an average of more than 20 percent annually. Globally, more than 90 million small businesses use Facebook products to help reach consumers, and grow their businesses.

I firmly believe that cultural barriers are broken down by connecting people through related experiences and values, but also by harnessing the power of technology and commerce. After all, with business and in life, our success and progress is amplified when it is shared.