

What The Neighbours Think

By Grenville Byford



TESEV
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It is surely remarkable that 78% of TESEV's respondents have watched a Turkish TV series. 'Valley of the Wolves', anyone? It would be easy to make light of this finding, but it is arguably the most important bit of data to emerge from TESEV's recent survey of *The Perception of Turkey in the Middle East 2010*. The message is clear, "Make more soap operas!". The overwhelmingly positive impression of America in Europe before and after the Second World War was made in Hollywood. Before Vietnam, America seen from abroad, was a country where the Sheriff wore a white hat and the good guys always won. Not to mention the fact that immigrants generally became millionaires – unless they became (very sexy) gangsters. Remember also, that one of the key things that undermined the Berlin wall was the television images that showed life really was better on the Western side. Turkey's ability to entertain the Middle East is an important asset and the government should do all it can to encourage the continued development of the Turkish media and entertainment industry. The money is nice of course, but it is about more than just money. There is however, a caveat. To succeed, an entertainment business must "entertain". Bureaucrats and politicians however, only become entertainers accidentally. Generally as a result of things they have done which they wish no one had ever found out about. Encourage the talent by all means, but don't dictate the end product. Al Jazeera is probably a good example of a media investment which is paying political dividends. There must surely be times

though, when the Qatari government profoundly wishes Al Jazeera's reporters and presenters in hell. So far though, they seem to have remembered that Al Jazeera's success (and its positive impact on Qatar's image) depends on its journalists being willing and able to call a spade a spade.

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A surprise in the survey is that the people of the Middle East appear to like each other. Only Iraq elicits a less than 50% favourable/somewhat favourable response. I have searched in vain for some similar data for the EU. I would hope the answers would be more positive, but I fear they would not be¹. The Europeans of course know each other better so the question is whether familiarity breeds contempt or affection. At all events, it is good to know that Turkey is held in such high regard, though I would not read too much into a five per cent year on year change. Statistically significant it may be, but it is easily reversible too. But why is Saudi Arabia equally

¹ One piece of data (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/datablog/2011/mar/21/europe-icm-poll-britain-data>) suggests Europeans like each other less. In this poll of attitudes towards the UK, only 30-40% of other Europeans from various countries say "Great Britain is a country I admire".

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popular, except for among the Iranians? The natural inclination would be to place Turkey and Saudi Arabia at opposite ends of the democracy/freedom/human rights spectrum. The only real similarity is that both countries are relatively rich. A revealing implication if true. And it would be interesting to know the impact of recent events. Are Egyptians more admired for their revolution and Saudis less so for their efforts to suppress Bahrain's?

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Which brings us to whether or not Turkey can be a model. Looking at both the 'yes' and the 'no' explanatory graphs, it is striking how many of the top responses relate to the issue of Islam. Of those who say 'Yes', 15% cite Turkey's Muslim background directly, but a further 10% cite Turkey 'Standing up for Palestinians and Muslims' which surely correlates pretty strongly. I doubt if Turkey would get many points for standing up for Israel (say). Equally, 11% of those who say 'No' say Turkey "is not Muslim enough" directly, but a further 12% cite "its secular political system" which is surely much the same thing for many Muslims, and yet a further 10% cite its (presumably positive) "relations with the West". Good relations with the West is something quite a few Muslims view as downright unislamic. Overall then, the issue of whether Turkey can be a model for the region is dominated by the question of whether it is or is not Muslim enough. 29% of all respondents² cite the issue in one form or another – much higher than any other factor.

² This 29% is made up of 25% (15% plus 10%) of the 66% who say 'Yes' and 33% (11% plus 12% plus 10%) of the 34% who say 'No'.

I do not think this observation has any policy implications for the Turkish government. Whether Turkey should be more or less Muslim in the future (whatever this may mean) is surely an issue for the Turkish people to decide. Other nations do not get a vote. The implication for Western governments however, is important. Because they are not Muslim, their countries will never be models for the Middle East. Westerners can extol the virtues of liberal capitalism and democracy/human rights all they want, but their experience will never be seen as relevant. Indeed, I would speculate that the key question in the Islamic world is not whether Muslims want prosperity and freedom – pretty clearly they do. It is whether they believe that they must choose between these things and being Muslims. If Turkey can demonstrate that no such choice is necessary, it will be doing the rest of us a huge favour. And in this context, it is relevant that Turkey is seen as a model both for "its economy" and "its democratic regime" pretty much equally. This argues against the notion that Middle Easterners will give up freedom for prosperity and stability. That would worry me, were I a member of the House of Saud and had just spent \$30bn or so in the hope of buying exactly just such acquiescence. On the other hand, when asked about domestic concerns, fully half of all respondents cite "The Economy/Economic Problems" whereas lack of human rights goes unmentioned. This I suspect is what we might call the 'Mukhabarat Effect'. In an autocracy, telling a stranger over a (possibly tapped) phone line that the economy is a problem is probably risky. Complaining about human rights, on the other hand is potentially suicidal.

PROFITING FROM A POSITIVE IMAGE

Then there is the related issue of Turkey's role in the Middle East. I am irresistibly reminded of Sally Field's first remarks when she won the

Oscar: “You like me!! You really like me!!!” I just hope that Turkey’s government and its people will take it all with a substantial grain of salt. Be gratified by all means, but be careful too.

What should the Turkish government do with Turkey’s burgeoning soft power? Well, the first order of business is surely to preserve it for the benefit of the Turkish economy. It is great news for Turkey that its products are so well known (76% of respondents know they have “consumed a Turkish product”) and that Turkey is the preferred source of foreign investment (twice as popular as Saudi Arabia). And it is the preferred holiday destination too. Though one might wonder how many of the respondents have the resources to take holidays abroad. Turkish business has a head start in the Middle East. What Turkey might also hope is that those good feelings translate into Turkey being a preferred country in which to invest, though the respondents to this survey are probably not in the small, charmed oligarchy of Middle Easterners who make such decisions.

Much trickier is to know how to leverage the Middle East’s good opinion in pursuit of the goal of “no problems with the neighbours”. Or as Ataturk once put it, “peace at home, peace abroad”. For it is surely in Turkey’s interest that there should be peace in the Middle East. Though what Turkey (unlike Israel) wants is no mere peace of stasis as supported by the Mubarak regime and its like, but rather a peace that promotes dynamic development. A rapidly developing Egypt for example, could become a very significant trading partner for Turkey. As for that matter, could a rapidly developing Iran. This however, is unlikely to occur until the governments of the region enjoy the support of their people, and choose to liberate their peoples’ energy rather than grimly repress it.

Given its good relations all around, Turkey can surely play a useful role in urging reform upon reluctant autocrats and patience upon frustrated

demonstrators. If Turkey can help define some common ground then perhaps change can come through evolution rather than revolution. Something that is certainly desirable, and something that China has shown is possible – at least so far. Talking to both sides however, is not without its risks. At the time of writing (April 10th, 2011) the Turkish government appears to be making some progress in brokering a deal between Libya’s revolutionaries in Benghazi and the battered, but my no means powerless Qaddafi regime in Tripoli. Turkey’s (necessarily) equivocal attitude towards NATO air strikes however, is making it no friends in Benghazi. Just as support for those same strikes would not endear it to Tripoli. Mediating is not without its dangers, and this is particularly in evidence when we turn to the great international issues that trouble the Middle East: The Arab-Israeli dispute and the question of Iran’s nuclear program.

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When asked whether “Turkey should play a mediatory role in resolving the Israeli Palestinian conflict?” Fully 78% of respondents say ‘yes’. Similarly, 61% of Iranian respondents “welcome Turkey’s role in [mediating] the crisis”. In each case, this is likely because they think Turkey as mediator would say what they want to hear. This is almost certainly the mirror image of what the average Israeli thinks with regard to both issues. Indeed, a recent poll³ by ‘Yisrael Hayom’ (Israel Today), a somewhat right wing daily, found 78 per cent of Jewish Israelis saw Turkey as an “enemy state”. Meanwhile, the US, and in particular, Congress has been vocally unhappy about

³ <http://www.topix.com/forum/world/turkey/TGG671A40I13QB3D2>

Turkey's Iran policy. And here is the problem. Successful mediators almost by definition, disappoint the partisans on both sides. Sometimes they are forgiven, but only if the mediation results in a settlement and that settlement is wildly successful. If no settlement occurs then they are despised for being willing to say the unsayable. Turkey should therefore approach the idea of mediating either of these great issues very carefully. The mere attempt may well poison relations with the US and Israel, and failure to move those two countries toward compromise – a sine qua non of progress towards a settlement – will disillusion those who welcomed Turkey's participation initially.

As an example, just look at the graph that contrasts the regional opinion of China and the USA. I am an American of course, and perhaps biased, but ask yourself just why China is viewed strikingly more favourably. It is poorer. It censors the internet aggressively. Corruption is much higher. Its leaders are more divorced from its people. And so on and so forth. In fact, some believe that China is a candidate to join what has so far been called the "Arab Spring". No one thinks that about

the US. I suspect there are two reasons for the two countries' relative standing. First, China is seen as a great example of a poor country turning itself into a moderately prosperous one right before our eyes⁴. Second, China has chosen not to involve itself in the Middle East whereas the US is in it up to its eye balls. Yes, the United States could have behaved in a more even-handed way, but even-handedness is more often honoured in the abstract than when it actually asks a party in a dispute to give up some treasured objective.

Finally, there is the fascinating observation that 27% of respondents think Turkey will be "the region's strongest economy in ten years". Given that most of these people are not development economists, I think we should read this as something they hope will happen. Yet more evidence that they wish Turkey well and that its soft power is real. For myself, I hope their 'economic forecast' is right.

4 Commentators tend to focus on the size of China's economy. Now the world's second largest. From the day to day perspective of the Chinese people however, GDP/Capita is what counts and that is still quite low.



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TESEV FOREIGN POLICY PROGRAMME

The Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (TESEV) is an independent non-governmental think-tank, analyzing Turkey's most pressing social, cultural, political and economic issues. Based in Istanbul, TESEV was founded in 1994 to serve as a bridge between academic research and the policy-making process in Turkey by opening new channels for policy-oriented dialogue and research.

TESEV's Foreign Policy Programme aims to contribute to the resolution of critical foreign policy issues, to advocate Turkey's membership in the European Union and to help Turkey define its regional and global position. Currently the Programme works under four main themes: the European Union, Cyprus, the Middle East and Armenia.

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