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TURKEY FOCUS GROUP RESEARCH

QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF PUBLIC OPINION

TRENDS RELATED TO COVID-19

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**QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF PUBLIC
OPINION TRENDS RELATED TO COVID-19**

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Public Opinion Trends: Summary Findings from Focus Groups in Turkey

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The fieldwork for this study was conducted in late June and early July 2020, when the official COVID-19 statistics published by Turkish authorities were showing approximately 1,000 new cases per day and an overall improving trend. By late October, these trends deteriorated significantly, especially after the government started announcing asymptomatic and mildly symptomatic cases in its daily reports in November.¹ This brought the number of new daily cases up to 30,000. IRI believes these developments may have affected public opinion on how the government has managed the public health aspect of the pandemic; therefore, it is important to take the changed context into account when interpreting the study participants' opinions regarding the COVID-19 crisis.

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¹ "Turkey Announces Asymptomatic Coronavirus Case Numbers for First Time Since July." *Reuters*, 25 Nov. 2020, [reuters.com/article/uk-health-coronavirus-turkey-cases/turkey-announces-asymptomatic-coronavirus-case-numbers-for-first-time-since-july-idUKKBN2852S3](https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-health-coronavirus-turkey-cases/turkey-announces-asymptomatic-coronavirus-case-numbers-for-first-time-since-july-idUKKBN2852S3).

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The International Republican Institute (IRI) conducted this focus group research in order to provide qualitative analysis of public opinion trends affected by the ongoing COVID-19 crisis and its effects in Turkey. The research explores reasons for public concerns over the direction of the country, the handling of the COVID-19 crisis, the economy, and the state and desirability of democracy compared to authoritarian systems in times of crisis. Additionally, the research seeks to uncover some of the characteristics of dominant perceptions of Turkey's foreign policy and the foreign powers seen as threats to the national interests of Turkey, with a special focus on the image of China and its role in the contemporary world, as well as the overall understanding of Turkey's increasing leverage on the global scene.

KEY FINDINGS

- Discussants see Turkey continuing to move in the wrong direction.
- The COVID-19 crisis seems to have restored some confidence in the government's capabilities, but discussants' focus is quickly shifting to economic troubles.
- Discussants prioritize democracy and human rights over strong leaders and security in the times to come, but the meaning of these concepts differed among the discussants.
- Turkey's foreign policy is perceived as confrontational, but the discussants share the government's rhetoric that Turkey is politically and militarily emerging as a global leader.
- Discussants perceive China as a rising power, and see China as an economic force that could outcompete Turkey's domestic production within the Turkish market.

BACKGROUND

On March 11, 2020, Turkey announced the first case of COVID-19 in the country. Since then, the government has focused on tackling the negative effects of the virus in Turkey. Turkey has also continued to deal with a number of issues that predated the pandemic. Turkey's economy has been experiencing periods of serious turbulence and an overall downturn. Public focus has centered on economic problems such as the increasing unemployment rate.

The sense that Turkey has been experiencing an economic crisis was dominant even prior to the pandemic. Since the transformation of Turkey's system of government from a parliamentary democracy to an executive presidential system, virtually all the crucial

decision-making powers have been formally centralized under the Turkish presidency. This reduced other state institutions' influence — a deficiency that becomes particularly apparent in times of crises.

Turkey has also taken a more assertive foreign policy approach, epitomized by continued direct participation in the war in Syria, increased involvement in the war in Libya and escalating tensions over territorial claims in the eastern Mediterranean. According to popular narratives in Turkey, these foreign policy challenges and efforts can boost national spirits and rally the support of a mainly pro-government base.

METHODOLOGY AND PARTICIPANT PROFILE

Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, all of the focus groups were conducted remotely through the teleconference software Zoom.

Participants were screened for the following characteristics: averagely informed (i.e., the level expected from the “average” citizen); interested in/ following political affairs and the situation in Turkey; not extreme supporters of any party; political-preference percentage distribution corresponding to the latest public opinion-polling numbers; and gender/education breakdown following the official census.

The focus groups were conducted by Istanbul Economics Research (IER), which recruited the participants by computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) and used the screening questionnaire developed by IRI. Participants were given financial incentives for participation in the discussions. IRI staff observed the groups. Two focus groups were conducted per city with participants from Adana, Ankara, Bursa and Gaziantep; additionally, four groups were conducted with participants from Istanbul, two of them consisting of Kurdish participants. IRI chose to virtually gather groups of participants hailing from the same cities so they would have common reference points and experiences. IRI chose those five cities because they represent a diverse range of Turkey’s major population centers.

Each focus group lasted between 90 minutes and two hours and consisted of eight participants led by a moderator. Participant screening ensured that voting preferences reflected the overall voting ratio in public opinion: Justice and Development Party (AKP) 40-45 percent, Republican People’s Party (CHP) 25-30 percent, HDP, İyi Party and MHP 10-15 percent. The educational breakdown of participants approximated official census data in Turkey. The groups consisting of Kurds residing in Istanbul were split close to 50-50 percent between AKP and HDP supporters. The groups in each city

were separated into younger (18-39) and older (40-65) age groups. As is common with qualitative research, findings from these focus group discussions are not necessarily representative of the opinions of all Turkish citizens in these cities.

Location	Date	Number of Participants
Istanbul (younger)	June 23, 2020	Four men; four women
Istanbul (older)	June 23, 2020	Four men; four women
Ankara (younger)	June 25, 2020	Four men; four women
Ankara (older)	June 25, 2020	Four men; four women
Adana (younger)	June 26, 2020	Four men; four women
Adana (older)	June 26, 2020	Four men; four women
Bursa (younger)	June 27, 2020	Four men; four women
Bursa (older)	June 27, 2020	Four men; four women
Gaziantep (younger)	July 2, 2020	Four men; four women
Gaziantep (older)	July 2, 2020	Four men; four women
Istanbul (Kurdish — younger)	July 6, 2020	Four men; four women
Istanbul (Kurdish — older)	July 6, 2020	Four men; four women

OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS

Discussants saw Turkey continuing to move in the wrong direction.

Most participants agreed that the country is headed in the wrong direction. Blame was apportioned depending on their political orientation. While some pro-government participants saw the ongoing pandemic as the main reason for the overall negative trends in the world, which they said have affected Turkey as well, most of the other participants focused on the declining quality of life in the country and did not attribute it to the pandemic. Even the public health aspect of the current crisis did not appear to have impacted the participants' views of the decline in the country as much as the economic downturn. Discussants shared their concerns through anecdotes about their personal experiences, which indicated that the effects of the economic stress are not simply abstract, but are now widely felt in the lives of common citizens.

“When I go shopping, I purchase half a kilo of something of which I used to buy one kilogram, or I often choose not to even buy it at all. As a family, we eliminated things that are not even luxury, but we have **started to regard them as luxury.**”

— Male participant, Adana²

“**Unemployment and poverty** come from [problems with education]. Educated people can't find jobs, and people who have no relation with the job in question are at the top of businesses. This is why I believe that **education is the most important problem.**”

— Female participant, Istanbul

The problem of Syrian refugees seems to have faded from view compared to previous years when it was a key focus of the public agenda. The subject came up only in places where Syrian refugees are most visible, either in camps or in Syrian refugee neighborhood communities like those in Adana and Gaziantep, with participants spontaneously mentioning the refugee problem as a driving force behind their pessimistic view of Turkey's overall direction.

Younger participants, in particular, noted the declining quality of education as one of the negative trends in the country. For many opposition-supporting participants, the perceived low quality of education stems from conservative religious principles, which they said have permeated the education system at the insistence of the current government. Most pro-government participants also listed education as an issue, but primarily pointed to the lack of employment opportunities after the completion of higher education rather than the curriculum's orientation or ideology.

² Quotes cited in this report have been minimally edited for clarity if necessary. The speaker's original expression has been preserved to the largest extent possible, including potential errors in word choice or grammar.

Most groups cited violence against women and lack of respect for women's rights as lingering problems, with younger, religiously conservative, female participants citing this as a particular concern.

The COVID-19 crisis seemed to have restored some confidence in the government's capabilities, but discussants' focus was quickly shifting to economic troubles.

Note: The fieldwork for this study was conducted in late June and early July 2020, when the official COVID-19 statistics published by Turkish authorities were showing approximately 1,000 new cases per day and an overall improving trend. By late October, these trends deteriorated significantly, especially after the government started announcing asymptomatic and mildly symptomatic cases in its daily reports in November.³ This brought the number of new daily cases up to 30,000. IRI believes these developments may have affected public opinion on how the government has managed the public health aspect of the pandemic; therefore, it is important to take the changed context into account when interpreting the study participants' opinions regarding the COVID-19 crisis.

“ I have a seven-year-old child. **Education is very important.** But as I can't feel secure about myself in this country, unfortunately, I don't feel secure for my child, too. This is the most important issue for me.”

— Female participant, Bursa

“ We have to evaluate **[the government's handling of COVID-19]** within the context of the world first and then make comments on Turkey. Nobody was left outside of the hospitals in Turkey. I think we managed it well.”

— Male participant, Bursa

Most groups found the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic to have been effective so far. Most participants, including opposition supporters, made positive remarks about the crisis action team led by Minister of Health Fahrettin Koca and its ability to organize the government's response. Minister Koca was seen as a skilled and effective communicator, in contrast with the traditional “aggressive and non-transparent” nature of the state's communication style, as the pro-opposition participants described it. In almost every group, the initial reaction to Turkey's performance on this issue was to compare it favorably with other countries, frequently drawing comparisons with large Western powers, which the discussants perceived as having unsuccessful and chaotic responses. This could indicate the success of the Turkish government's communication strategy, which has emphasized Turkey's superior handling of the crisis and highlighted sending Turkish aid abroad, even to larger and richer countries. Participants in different groups mentioned the highly publicized cases of Turkish government repatriation of ethnic Turks from Western countries to Turkey for “better treatment,” and saw this as an instance of the Turkish government exhibiting compassion and efficacy in the face of the West's inabilities and mismanagement.

³ “Turkey Announces Asymptomatic Coronavirus Case Numbers for First Time Since July.” *Reuters*, 25 Nov. 2020, [reuters.com/article/uk-health-coronavirus-turkey-cases/turkey-announces-asymptomatic-coronavirus-case-numbers-for-first-time-since-july-idUKKBN2852S3](https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-health-coronavirus-turkey-cases/turkey-announces-asymptomatic-coronavirus-case-numbers-for-first-time-since-july-idUKKBN2852S3).

Following the initial conversations around the public health aspect of the crisis, participants in each group quickly shifted to the economic effects of the pandemic. Most short-term concerns were directly tied to the participants' gloomy predictions about Turkey's already-deteriorating economic situation. Only some of the pro-government participants saw the COVID-19 crisis as solely responsible for economic challenges that Turkey is facing — the majority believed that Turkey's economic downturn started well before the pandemic. Most participants did not believe that Turkey could emerge as a global economic leader in the post-COVID world. A slight majority agreed that Turkey could overcome its economic perils on its own without much help from abroad, but still viewed rebuilding relations with Turkey's traditional (mainly Western) partners as very important.

Discussants prioritized democracy and human rights over strong leaders and security in the times to come, but the meaning of these concepts differed among the discussants.

“ Personally, I don't feel concerned anymore ... I graduated from university and I am **unable to find a job** anyway. Many of my friends are unable to find a job ... **My biggest concern is unemployment** as I need to earn money.”

— Female participant, Istanbul

“ I don't think we can handle this crisis on our own. Everything was already in a mess before the pandemic — **the pandemic has only made it even worse.**”

— Male participant, Istanbul

Most discussants found the concepts of democracy and human rights more appealing than strong leaders and security. However, these terms had different meanings for different participants. Most pro-government participants understood a strong leader to be a prerequisite for democracy because they believe that the will of the people can be realized only through a strong leader.

Similarly, when the issue of human rights was raised, a majority agreed that there should be more respect for fundamental rights in the post-COVID-19 period. However, when the rights of LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex) individuals and specific examples of freedom of expression were raised, the participants tended to split along “traditional” lines. The more conservative and pro-government discussants generally tolerated a certain degree of free expression, but within boundaries. According to them, LGBTI rights should be respected, but within certain limits. Conservative participants generally did not clearly articulate these limits, although their general condemnation of the “ideology of homosexuality” suggested that they reject pro-gay-rights political advocacy. While these participants approved of the idea of free expression in principle, they also supported existing laws criminalizing public insults and listed some public cases — mainly against figures from the political opposition — as positive examples of legal limits to free expression.

Most of the opposition-supporting participants saw the question of who regulates freedom of expression as problematic, as opposed to the concept of regulation itself. These participants believed that punishment in Turkey today is determined arbitrarily and as a result of political pressure. Turkey's foreign policy was perceived as confrontational, but the discussants shared the government's rhetoric that Turkey is politically and militarily emerging as a global leader.

While foreign policy is often seen as a unifying and nonpartisan factor in Turkish politics, focus groups revealed dissent toward the government's foreign policy approach, particularly from opposition supporters. Most participants who were critical of Turkey's foreign policy saw it as unnecessarily confrontational and aggressive. Conversely, the participants who were supportive of the government saw Turkey's foreign policy as proactive, instead of defensive and reactive, showing Turkey's independence on the regional and global stage.

Most of these positive attitudes were inspired by Turkey's perceived military successes in Syria and Libya. The rationale of most supporters was that Turkey is building its political and military independence through hard power and strengthening its military industry, which was seen as having the potential to yield

“ A strong leader is a democratic leader, I suppose. That should be somebody who can act according to the people's wishes and has the power to do so.”

— Female participant, Ankara

“ The wife of Selahattin Demirtaş (Kurdish opposition leader) has been insulted and threatened by a person who was detained and released after seven days. After that, the daughter of President [Recep] Erdoğan was also publicly insulted on Twitter, and that man is still in jail.”

— Female participant, Bursa

economic improvements in the country. Pro-opposition participants' unfavorable views toward Turkey's foreign policy arose from their view of Turkey's foreign policy approach as isolationist and their fears that this would leave Turkey without international allies. The fact that potential retaliation by the big powers against Turkey was not the main concerns of the pro-opposition discussants can demonstrate that even dissidents recognized Turkey as a global player able to respond to most global powers with matching force.

Most participants viewed large Western powers, and increasingly Russia, as the primary international threats to Turkey. The United States' support for the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) forces in Syria was cited as a key reason for this attitude, informing perceptions of a conspiracy by Western powers to threaten Turkey's integrity. Kurdish focus groups in Istanbul were more pro-Western in their foreign policy views; but with the exception of these participants, there was a general consensus that Turkey does not have true friends aside from Azerbaijan. Israel was also mentioned as an international adversary and a security threat.

Discussants perceived China as a rising power, and saw China as an economic force that could outcompete Turkey's domestic production within the Turkish market.

The majority of participants did not seem to be preoccupied with China. However, when questioned about China's rising influence in the world, most expressed some concerns about China's economic power, with participants pointing to its cheap production methods and unethical business practices. Participants saw enhanced domestic production as a key priority. There was general agreement that Turkey should deal carefully with China and consider options for beneficial cooperation.

Some participants saw China as a victim of unjust global alienation, and drew parallels with their perception of Turkey's status in the world. However, China was also recognized as being capable of overcoming this alienation through its production power. Concerns about Turkey and China's economic relationship were expressed specifically in terms of production of material goods, including agriculture and industrial output, not in terms of trade or other economic relationships.

“If there are aggressive domestic policies, it is only natural [that] **we will also have aggressive foreign policy.**”

— Male participant, Ankara

“At the moment, **China is in a highly rising position** in terms of economy. [The Turkish government] has to get in touch with them for sure. We are living in a global world and there must be cooperation with a rising global power.”

— Male participant, Istanbul

When asked about Chinese sharp-power practices, most participants showed little knowledge about this. Additionally, there was almost no reaction from the participants about the Chinese Communist Party's totalitarian practices in China and, more importantly, the majority did not see this political aspect of China's influence as any potential threat to Turkey. The issue of the treatment of Uyghurs in China was rarely articulated by the participants. There was general consensus that China has not provided truthful and accurate information about the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, most participants believed that, apart from Turkey, China was the country that dealt with the pandemic best. This indicates that most participants did not think that the free flow of information is required for a successful fight against COVID-19 and related or similar crises.

“**China has been alienated** from the rest of the world like Turkey has been. But with a strong domestic production China is able to overcome this.”

— Female participant, Gaziantep

“Above all, we need to better ourselves [**by increasing domestic production**]. But if we must choose an international partner, China is a logical option if we do it carefully.”

— Male participant, Bursa

“Our president is **challenging the whole world.**”

— Female participant, Adana

“Honestly, I also don't think that China is telling the truth about the number of epidemic cases. **I think that they lower the numbers.** If you ask me whether they're getting over the epidemic, they seem like they are but we can't know that for sure. But of course, in terms of cooperation, **China feels better for me [than] other countries.**”

— Female participant, Istanbul

CONCLUSION

The focus group discussions underscored a persistent sense of pessimism about the country's trajectory, largely grounded in economic anxieties that predated the COVID-19 pandemic. Most participants shared anecdotal experiences of how their quality of life was affected by economic hardship. Some topics that do not currently dominate the national political discourse in the country arose spontaneously in qualitative discussions, such as the questionable quality of education in Turkey (cited mostly by the younger participants) and the problem of violence against women (cited mostly by younger, conservative, female participants). Both findings indicated that different underlying concerns within different segments of the society can be found and are affecting the prevailing dissatisfaction of the majority.

The Turkish government's response to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic was widely viewed as successful and proof of the country's stable healthcare system. The government's message of success by comparing Turkey's response to those of the global powers gained a lot of traction with the public; most participants compared Turkey's relative success favorably against the perceived failures of many larger, richer and predominantly Western countries. However, the potential for the COVID-19 crisis to deepen Turkey's already-serious economic problems was a major concern for most participants, and a majority did not have confidence that the government would be able to successfully address those problems.

While participants seemed to want more democracy and respect for human rights, rather than stronger leaders and greater security, this support became less straightforward once specific examples of basic democratic principles and respect for human rights were posited.

Participants continued to view Turkey's foreign policy as assertive, but some also saw it as erratic and unnecessarily confrontational. However, most discussants also shared the perception that Turkey has positioned itself as a regional and even global player through its current foreign policy and militaristic hard power. In the view of most participants, this makes Turkey less susceptible to being undermined by major powers; some of the more critical participants said it also threatens to isolate the country internationally.

Although the majority of participants saw China as a rising global power that could pose an economic challenge to Turkey, they were not concerned with the broader implications of China's sharp power. Discussants expressed an almost-unanimous lack of trust in information originating from China about the pandemic, but they did not view the Chinese autocratic political system as a threat to Turkey. Rather, there was a sense that this system is allowing China to successfully manage its challenges, including the ongoing COVID-19 crisis. This aligned with an understanding among most participants that democratic values are not necessarily a guarantee of success in extreme crises, with participants viewing authoritarian and totalitarian systems like China's as more stable and better equipped to overcome crises. Most participants indicated their desire to see Turkey take careful steps to engage with China in the future.

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