

SOCIAL COHESION IN TURKEY

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Recently we have been faced with a landscape of Turkey where the problem of polarization is getting deeper, the culture of shared living is getting weaker, and every identity feels safe internally but does not feel safe against different identities, amidst a process of transformation in the fields of economy, technology and urbanization among others. Turkey gives the impression of a “country of identities” which has weaknesses in creating shared values, participation in civil society, and approaching safely towards different people. In this regard, we can conclude that we live in a “Turkey of Identities” rather than a “Turkey of Values”.

How can we reason this general conclusion? Which factors lead to the emergence of a Turkey of Identities? Is the problem of polarization experienced equally in all areas of social life, or is it experienced at differing degrees? When trying to answer these questions, one faces the concept of “social cohesion” as a key research area which has been attracting a significant interest recently. Social cohesion researches which focus on the subjects of (a) social connectedness; (b) social relations; and (c) understanding of common good to explore social life in a country often reveal significant findings about the interrelations or degree of “living together” and “social confidence” in that country.¹ Countries with high levels of social cohesion are at the same time those which are against polarization, which have low degrees of conflict and high social confidence and shared living.

This research has been conducted to study social cohesion in Turkey, where security risks and areas of conflict have caused serious problems recently. The research suggests that social cohesion is at a moderate level in Turkey (55/100). Below is a brief summary of the research findings which are discussed in greater detail in following sections.

- In Turkey, the most important element of social cohesion is social connectedness, which is fed by the sense of belonging and which means being connected with the rest of the society (66/100). It should be noted, however, that social connectedness occurs within similar identities rather than between different identities. In other words, while people are connected with similar people and people from each identity are interconnected among themselves, the connection between different people or different identities is weak. This problem poses an obstacle to creating an “understanding of common good” (40/100) which forms a key dimension of social cohesion and shared living.

This point allows us to make two findings which are in line with the findings of researches conducted in the fields of polarization and social confidence: In our country, (a) the degree of confidence within similarities is high despite the low degree of confidence between differences, which is a fundamental determinant of social confidence. In this context, Turkey can be characterized as a country of “identities”; (b) aspects like understanding of common good (40/100), compliance with social rules (39/100) and civic participation (22/100), which are key to social cohesion, stability and shared living have not developed sufficiently.

GENERAL SOCIAL COHESION INDEX → 55 (Medium Level)					
CORRELATIVITY	66	SOCIAL RELATIONS	60	COLLECTIVE INTEREST UNDERSTANDING	40
Belonging	80	Deep Social Networks	68	Solidarity and Philanthropy	59
Trust in Organisations	59	Trust in People	46	Abiding to Social Norms	39
Justice Perception	59	Acknowledgment of Pluralism	66	Civil Engagement	22

However, it should be noted that the polarization in Turkey is experienced mostly in politics and between political actors and leaders, but does not reflect equally to the social life. This is in line with the second key finding of our research, which suggests that the axis of “Pro-Government / Anti-Government” is the second most important barrier to social cohesion after ethnic origin. Three most critical barriers to social cohesion have been identified as (a) Ethnic axis (7,2 points on a scale of 10); (b) Political axis (7,01 points); and (c) Devout – Secular axis (6,2 points). The fact that “Pro-Government / Anti-Government” axis, i.e. the political axis, has become the second critical obstacle to social cohesion may seem to be normal in an environment of strong government – weak opposition, but it is important that political axis has become the second strongest obstacle to the development of social cohesion. This conclusion is both associated with the finding that the problem of polarization is experienced essentially in the political domain, between political actors, and highlights the importance of efforts by political actors and in the political domain in order to strengthen social cohesion and shared living.

- The tensions and polarization considered between Turks and Kurds (ethnic), Pro-Government and Anti-Government groups (political) and the Devout and Secular groups (secularism) are not as intensive in daily life as they are in politics. Although the level of “general confidence” within similar identities, living styles and groups is high, but the level of “general confidence” between differences is low, the rights and freedoms of different identities or living styles are not found to be among the fundamental issues before social cohesion. For example, the Kurdish issue which is considered on the basis of the rights and freedoms of our citizens with Kurdish origin (4%) or Secularism (1%), Refugees/Syrian Migrants (4%) seem to be in the lowest ranks of issues before social cohesion, together with Environmental problems (%4) and Urban Problems. In this context, when thinking about the issue of polarization, one could conclude that it is possible to make a distinction between social life and political life and that the latter is the primary area where polarization takes place and deepens, by looking at the obstacles before social cohesion.

The three primary obstacles before social cohesion have been found to be Security / Terrorism (34%), Economy / Unemployment / Poverty (27%) and Justice / Rule of Law (8%). These obstacles also correspond to the three fundamental problems of Turkey, as demonstrated by various studies. The fundamental problem areas of Security and Economy are the primary barriers to social cohesion, followed by Law (the issue of Justice). This result derived from the responses of research participants coincide with the problems which have been the focus of public debate after the failed coup attempt of July 15 and the so-called Trench Wars.

- In addition to, and supportive of, these general conclusions, the following findings have been derived from the research:

a | In our country, where elected governments hold the power for a long time, people still have the highest levels of confidence in security and healthcare institutions, particularly including the Army (73%) and Police (72%) and Hospitals (64%), rather than politicians and politics;

b | Research results demonstrate that the levels of civic engagement (22/100) and compliance with social rules (39/100) are low in our country. These two facts demonstrate overall confidence and “social capital”, which is critical for building a shared living and strengthened civil society, are still very weak in our country.

c | The most comprehensive identity adopted in the Turkish society appears to be “Turks”. Eighty percent of the society always and frequently identify themselves as “Turk”.

d | However, in our country, identities are dynamic and more importantly transitive: for example, of the people who identify themselves as “Devout”, 66 percent identify themselves also as “Pro-Atatürk” and 60 percent identify themselves as “Secular” as well. These findings also suggest that the issue of polarization reflects much less to social life than it does to political life; and as a final point,

e | There is a high level of support in the society for the policies implemented for “Reconstruction of State” (47%) and Combat with Terrorism (46%) in the aftermath of the failed coup attempt of July 15. In the light of all these results, we could state that we live in a country where;

- people are affected from negative developments in the fields of security and economy through concerns and fear, they trust only people similar to themselves; there are weaknesses with regard to civic engagement and creation of shared values; but they are not closed to shared living and social cohesion;
- both the source and solution of the problems of polarization and shared living lie in politics and politicians.

In Turkey, we need to further promote studies on polarization and confidence, besides “social cohesion” studies which produce parallel findings with the former. We have to promote studies on social cohesion to ensure a shift from a Turkey of Identities to a Turkey of Values which is democratic, which has a high culture of shared living, which is economically dynamic and which enjoys social confidence. This study is the first one in the field of social cohesion, which will be analyzed more comprehensively and in depth in the future. We hope this useful and important study attracts your interest.

CONCLUSION

While social connectedness and social relations are strong in Turkish society, the understanding of common good, which would serve social cohesion, is at lower-middle level.

A very high sense of belonging positively contributes to social connectedness. However, this connectedness is not equally fed by the perception of confidence in institutions and justice. In this framework, improving the social perception of justice particularly through increased confidence in media and political institutions and ensuring transparency in the use of public resources and equal opportunities would have positive repercussions on social connectedness, and thus social cohesion.

Turkish society which has sound social relations in general features a highly positive approach to the recognition of differences as well. This is a positive attribute for social cohesion. However, the tendency to trust people is lower, and is recorded as moderate. Raising the level of confidence among people may require a special process and effort. However, addressing concerns about public security (smoothing the tendencies of aggression, making public spaces safe and secure) would positively contribute to the overall sense of security.

The understanding of common good, which highlights the “being a society” dimension of social cohesion seems to be at the lower-middle level. One can observe the positive impacts of solidarity and collaboration enabled by social networks. However, compliance with social rules that regulate social life (e.g. traffic rules) and participation in social debates and politics are at a low level. These findings point to the need for social practices and political approaches aiming at promoting the understanding of common good and boosting participation.

Another key finding of the study is there is a generally accepted views in the society that women must actively participate in social life, business and politics. For this reason, restrictive discourses targeting women are negatively affecting social peace in general.

The social tensions considered between Turks and Kurds (ethnic), Pro-Government and Anti-Government groups (political) and the Devout and Secular groups (secularism) do not reflect to daily life significantly. It appears that the transitive identity structure in the society that recognizes differences is playing a positive role in digesting these tensions

In summary, raising the level of moderate social cohesion in Turkish society requires strengthening the sense of confidence and developing an understanding of common good. This, in turn, requires the institution of politics to improve its ability to strongly represent the society and to become more operational.