



TURKEY

WHAT EVERYONE NEEDS TO KNOW

ANDREW FINKEL

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Istanbul and Environs



1

INTRODUCTION

Why this book?

The method of this book is to investigate a complex subject succinctly by posing a series of questions that beg answers that beget more questions. It is hard to squeeze an introduction into such a scheme unless the very first question is, "Why did you write this book?" That, of course, is the most awkward question of all, since anyone setting out to produce an account of modern Turkey has an uncomfortable sense of being about to commit perjury. Perhaps all truisms have a mirage-like tendency to evaporate the closer one approaches and it would be foolish to pretend that Turkey is uniquely inscrutable. However, as a journalist working in Turkey for over two decades, I have learned from hard experience the challenge of writing news stories with shelf-lives longer than a week, let alone producing generalities that will nestle comfortably on a bedside table. Turkey is a society in the throes of enormous change, and any snapshot of the here-and-now is bound to be blurred.

Nonetheless, I believe a book can locate the underlying reasons for this fast-moving dynamic, some of which will reveal my own motives for embarking on this hazardous

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project. I first moved to Istanbul for a year in 1967, a schoolboy in tow to his parents. Philadelphia, where I was born, was then a city of two million people. Like many American cities, it has since shed population and now has 1.5 million people—approximately the size of the Istanbul I first encountered over forty years ago. Today, Istanbul is a megacity of well over 13 million people, the lion's share of that growth fueled by the in-migration of people in search of a better life. At the height of its expansion in 1970, the population of Istanbul increased every year by what elsewhere would be regarded as a decent-sized city in its own right (over 300,000 annually: think Cardiff or Toledo). By 2009 the rate of increase had slowed to a mere 1.7 percent, but that still amounts to 218,000 people. And what was true for Istanbul has been true for other Turkish cities. In 1945 a quarter of the population was urban; that figure is closer to 70 percent now. In France, one of Europe's most rural societies, 77 percent of the population is urban, suggesting that in Turkey this transition has not fully run its course.

In Washington, the realization that there was something about Turkey that the United States government did not fully understand dawned very suddenly when, on March 1, 2003, the Turkish parliament denied the U.S. military the right to launch a northern front from Turkish territory in the imminent war in Iraq. The Pentagon, the U.S. Congress, and the media watched openmouthed as Turkey, once the most stalwart of NATO members, behaved like Atlas setting down his load. Had Turkey suddenly renounced the Western orientation on which the Republic was founded as well as its own strategic importance to its allies? An answer of sorts came a year later when the government in Ankara clawed through a process of reform to win the right to begin accession talks

with the European Union. Even more confusing was that the government which showed such strength of purpose was led by a charismatic prime minister who had cut his political teeth in a pro-Islamic and anti-Western political movement. Was his conversion a Nixon-in-China realpolitik epiphany or a cynical attempt to outflank Turkey's secularist establishment? What, if anything, had changed?

Any study of Turkey trying to answer the concerns of an English-speaking audience must address how an ever-more-powerful nation, in which almost the entire population is born into the Muslim faith, allies itself in the world. Will Turkey continue to act as the self-declared bridge between East and West in the new century? And can it complete a process of democratic reform and create the opportunities and prosperity an increasingly informed citizenry has come to expect? These are all wise questions. Yet the subtext of my own enquiry is whatever happened to the Istanbul I knew as a youth.

I returned to Turkey as a journalist in 1989, the year in which the Soviet Empire imploded. In May of that year, some months before the toppling of the Berlin Wall, I stood in a refugee camp inside the Turkish-Bulgarian border that was trying to accommodate some of the 300,000 Bulgarian Turks who had fled from the last gasp of tyrannical discrimination during the regime of Todor Zhikov—the party boss who had ruled his country since 1954. It was impossible not to conclude that while the bankruptcy of Soviet ideology may have been the motor of change, the uncontrolled movement of population was steering events. In 1991, at the end of the First Gulf War, I climbed a mountain on the other side of the country, on Turkey's border with Iraq, and witnessed what seemed a biblical spectacle—an exodus of hundreds of thousands of Iraqi Kurdish refugees trudging through snow, trying to

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keep a step ahead of Saddam Hussein's Republican Guard. In 1999, I was back in the first refugee camp, near Bulgaria, now filled with Albanian Kosovars who had been airlifted from a mud-sodden no man's land along the Macedonian border. In 2011, Turkey prepared to meet yet another wave of refugees in its southeast as the al-Assad regime in Syria imploded into civil war.

If Turkey seems surrounded by other people's history, then it was in the center of a transformation of its own. To put it at its simplest, the city where I live has, during my lifetime, doubled in population, then doubled again, and then doubled a third time. That in the process no regime collapsed and no walls fell has only made Turkish society harder to read. The story of postwar Turkish society is that of the social impulses and political responses generated by this huge movement of people. This helps, too, to give a point of reference for those unfamiliar with Turkey. Saul Bellow's 1953 novel *The Adventures of Augie March*, set in the Chicago Depression, describes a tough world of hustle, hardships, and opportunity that is not a far cry from the big Turkish cities of the 1970s. By the same token, anyone trying to grapple with the threat posed by a popular Islamic revival of the 1990s could first consider the rise of Methodism or Nonconformism during the British industrial revolution. Protestant "fundamentalism" was seen as a militant challenge to the established orthodoxy, though in retrospect it appears to have been a deeply conservative force, famously providing a work ethic, support network, and sense of purpose to the urban poor and emerging middle class, as well as reconciling individuals to social change.

Turkey's own ability to remember is affected by its youthful demographic. Half the population is under twenty-nine years

of age. An “average” Turk, therefore, would have been born after the 1980 military coup and might recall growing up in a country dominated by the Motherland Party of Turgut Özal, who came to power when the country returned to civilian rule in 1983. Mr. Özal is remembered as a visionary who accelerated Turkish integration into the global economy. Alas, his party no longer exists, imploding of its own accord. Turkish university students born in 1990 can be forgiven for not remembering who was in power during their formative decade, since there were eleven separate coalition governments made up from parties of which all but one or two have disappeared from the political scene. A schoolchild born in 2000 is one year older than the party governing Turkey at the time this book is being written.

The Turkish economy has followed an even steeper roller-coaster ride. Beginning in 1970, the country suffered from the rare malaise of chronic inflation. Throughout the 1990s prices rose on average 72 percent per year, enough to require a 20 million lira note but not enough to result in hyperinflation (as in the German Weimar Republic of the 1920s when shoppers needed a wheelbarrow instead of a wallet). My monthly university salary in 1982 was not enough to buy a loaf of bread by the end of that decade. Not surprisingly, for most of Turkey’s postwar history there was no such thing as a mortgage. Who on earth could estimate the rate of repayment on even a medium-term loan? In the United States or Europe, home loans are equal to or even greater than the GDP. In Turkey, home loans are still negligible—some 5 percent of GDP. Foreign banks have, therefore, been queuing up to get into the Turkish market now that inflation and interest rates have become relatively stable. Yet despite the absence of long-term credit, rates of home ownership are at around 70 percent,

a figure comparable to that in the United States (in conditions of instability, people will do anything to own their own home). In the United States, an underregulated mortgage market created a cycle of boom and all-too-dramatic bust. Turkey might emulate that treacherous path and yet a well-regulated mortgage market could be the ticket to economic parity with the European Union it aspires to join. The question of “why does Turkey matter” pertains not simply to defense analysts; the investment community ignores at its peril the fastest-growing credit card market in Europe. UN projections suggest the Turkish population, currently at over 75 million, will stabilize at around 95 million by 2050 but that by 2025 it will already be greater than that projected for Germany. Yet today, Turkey consumes less than Holland (population less than 17 million), so it is a market that has to be watched.

What will Turkey look like tomorrow? The simple (if unhelpful) answer is, not like it looks today. But the appearance of even dramatic change can be deceptive. Several years ago, I returned to the street in the Philadelphia suburb where I grew up. I felt like a character in an Ingmar Bergman film, returning to a perfectly preserved memory in black and white. It so happens that I have a view from my house in Istanbul westward across the Bosphorus Strait—from Asia to Europe—to the hillside where I first lived over forty years ago. My 1967 house no longer exists; in its place is the footprint of a vast suspension bridge (the fourth-longest in the world, and the longest outside the United States) that links the two continents. Its elegant span, when completed in 1973, became an instant symbol of Turkish modernization.

Calling Istanbul “a bridge between civilizations” became the city’s favorite metaphor. Before too long, however, the

Bosphorus Bridge acquired a less flattering reputation in urban planning literature for generating the very problems it was meant to solve. The bridge opened up the city to urban sprawl and traffic gridlock that the authorities could not even pretend to control. So in 1988, Istanbul welcomed a second Fatih Sultan (Mehmet, the Conqueror) Bridge across the Bosphorus to patch up all the problems created by the first. This bridge was meant to allow intercity traffic bypass Istanbul altogether. Commuting traffic would go over the first bridge; long-distance traffic would go over the second. Even before the inaugural ribbon on the second bridge was snapped, however, there was a vast amount of speculative real-estate investment on the Asian side of the bridge. Huge unplanned neighborhoods began to take root. Twenty years on, an infinitesimal portion of the second bridge's traffic is intercity, and the pace of urbanization along its route has been seven times that of elsewhere in a city that has already grown exponentially. Now there are plans for a third bridge.

So if Turkey appears to many a place of extraordinary change, others speak of a country where some things remain depressingly the same. Many of the questions Turkey asks itself have been slow to find answers. Can the evolving demands of Turkey's large Kurdish population be resolved within a rigid constitutional framework that enshrines Turkish nationalism? Can Turkey reach a stasis between government and opposition, politics and military? Can it understand its own history in a way that offers the prospect of reconciliation with its neighbor in Armenia?

Turkey's response to these questions has consequences for the rest of the world. The debates that rage at home resonate well beyond its frontiers. For example, its application to become part of the European Union challenges the notion of

European identity and poses the question of where Europe ends. In 1950, Turkey made a peaceful transition from a single-party regime to a multiparty democracy. Yet subsequent military coups and the Turkish military's continued opposition to an Islamic-leaning government cast doubt on how deep the country's democratic roots run. Does Turkey hold the antidote to religious polarization or is it itself becoming a battleground in the clash of civilizations? Is Turkey's new self-confidence an example for the world or is it leading the country into hubris and isolation?

Questions, questions. Although I have tried to confine myself to what everyone needs to know about Turkey, what has kept me attached to this country all these years is that I wander through this maze of ever more elusive answers.

What is a Turk?

"Happy is the one who says, 'I am a Turk,'" is the much-quoted maxim of a much-quoted man. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, Turkey's founding president, uttered the words as the emotional finale to a speech in 1933, marking the tenth anniversary of the Republic. It is a simple idea ("if you think you're Turkish, then you are") that belies a sophisticated approach to nation-building. You become a Turk by feeling the benefits and obligations of being a citizen of the Republic of Turkey. In historical context, Atatürk's emphasis on Turkishness was a way of forging an inclusive national identity out of disparate parts. In this, he was very successful. Today, Turkish nationalism is a very powerful force. At the time, even the name for the new state, *Türkiye*, was borrowed from Italian.

Prior to the foundation of the Republic, the word "Turk," although used by the rest of Europe to refer to the sultan's

domains, referred to one of the many ethnicities of the Ottoman Empire. Members of a pre-nineteenth-century elite would have been as pleased to be labeled a “Turk” as they would have been to be called a “country bumpkin.” A growing pride in Turkishness mirrored the success of other nationalisms—Greek, Slav, Armenian, and Arab—in creating a new loyalty distinct from empire. So to be a Turk was to fight the other nationalist fires with fire. The opposite strategy, Ottomanism, was fealty to a monarch and a state that transcended religion or ethnicity. This was a doomed idea in Europe at the time of the World War I. The very first clause of the Treaty of Lausanne (1923), which called the Republic into existence, also called for the compulsory exchange of the bulk of the Muslim living in Greece with the Greek Orthodox population of Turkey living outside Istanbul. The early twentieth century was an era of racial confrontation, not multiculturalism.

Religion was very much a component of Balkan and Caucasian nationalisms. The autocephalous Orthodox churches in Greece, Bulgaria, and Serbia still play a powerful political role in the states they inspired. Islam also played a role in nascent Turkish nationalism. Influential literary figures like Namik Kemal (1840–1888), who pioneered the use of a written vernacular Turkish language, also regarded Islam and nation as closely intertwined. However, the Republic was determined to break the power of religion, which it regarded as a prop of the sultanic regime. “Turkishness” therefore represented a new kind of social cohesion, one based on popular sovereignty and the defense of well-defined territory. It did not exclude faith as one of its components. In a clause in the 1924 Constitution Islam appears as the official religion, but the clause was deleted four years later. Article 66 of the 1982 Constitution continues to define a “Turk”

merely in terms of the bonds of citizenship, and all citizens regardless of creed or gender enjoy equality under the law. By contrast, in everyday parlance, the appellation “Turk” is reserved for someone whose native language is Turkish and who is born into the Muslim faith. This immediately creates ambiguity, since it implies there are Turkish citizens who at some level are not really “Turks.”

The obvious examples are non-Muslims (Greeks, Jews, Syriac Christians, and Armenians) whom that same Treaty of Lausanne recognizes as “minorities.” Minorities are official anomalies, tolerated exceptions to the one-size-fits-all national identity. Turkish officialdom finds it almost impossible to accept that non-Muslim citizens could confine their principal loyalty to the Turkish state. Ask an ethnic Greek or Jewish or Armenian Turk whether they could become a commissioned officer, a state-appointed provincial governor, or even a diplomat, and they would regard it as a silly question, even though there are no statutes forbidding their entry into these professions.

However, there have been minority Members of Parliament (MPs,) and in 2010 an ethnic Armenian Turk passed a public examination to be accepted as a member of Turkey’s EU delegation. Whether these are examples of breakthroughs, window dressing, or exceptions proving the rule is perhaps no longer a pressing issue since the number of non-Muslim Turkish citizens is in decline. Non-Muslims made up a plurality of the population in Istanbul in 1900 (56%). This fell to 35 percent just before the start of World War II. Now minorities are estimated at below 250,000 nationwide in a population of an estimated 75 million people.

Far more problematic are Kurds, whose anomalous status could not be officially recognized. Atatürk’s promise