

Who are the Turks? A manual for Turks¹
A Personal Reflection

Several months ago, during a conversation with my “Turkey Faculty Seminar” colleagues, I used the phrase “real Turkey” while trying to describe the Turks. Since then, I have been seriously trying to figure out who Turks are, who I am, and who I wanted my colleagues to see in Turkey. The title “A manual for Turks” was a tongue-in-cheek attitude to this frustrating question. Nowadays Turks are discussing their identity, as a result of Prime Minister Erdoğan’s introduction of two new concepts: sub-identity and supra-identity (*alt kimlik* and *üst kimlik*). This debate in Turkey shows clearly that the Turks do indeed need a manual. This report tries to answer this question of identity, and it consists of two parts: my thoughts and feelings before we went to Turkey and my observations during our trip: “My” kaleidoscope, and “their” microscopes or telescopes?

The Planning and Choices: Which Identity?

INVITATION

**Galloping from Far Asia and jutting out
 into the Mediterranean like a mare's head
 this country is ours.**

**Wrists in blood, teeth clenched, feet bare
 and this soil spreading like a silk carpet,
 this hell, this paradise is ours.**

**Shut the gates of plutocracy, don't let them open again,
 annihilate man's servitude to man,
 this invitation is ours..**

**To live like a tree single and at liberty
 and brotherly like the trees of a forest,
 this yearning is ours.**

**Nazim Hikmet
 (1902-1963)**

When I was asked to participate in the preparation of the Faculty Seminar to Turkey in May 2005, my yearning was to show “my country” to my colleagues when we all traveled to Turkey first figuratively (pre-departure lectures and presentations), then literally. My yearning was to share with my colleagues not only the food, the music, the places, but the “real” Turkey: the real flavors, the real sounds, and the real places. My invitation to my colleagues was delivered with mixed feelings. I wanted them to see the

¹ Title inspired by “Who are The Turks? A manual for teachers by Justin McCarthy and Carolyn McCarthy (2003).

best and the worst and the ordinary. I certainly did not want them to get a biased perspective, or a one-sided perspective. Thus, when I heard from a Turkish colleague during a pre-departure lecture that she and her family could sit at the dinner table during Ramadhan for *Iftar*, and some members of the family could drink their wine and beer while others broke their fast, I could not help wincing and thinking “No, no. That’s not who we are. Yes, we are modern/Western/European, but not that much”. Yes, we consume alcohol (a lot according to all the Turkish TV shows where everybody is drinking constantly) despite the fact that Turkey is 99% Muslim and in Islam alcohol is strictly forbidden. Yes, we have become more and more Western and European since 1923 (sometimes even more liberal than the Westerners). But, Ramadhan, the Holy month is still holy and sacred. Yes, there are many people who do not fast, and drink during Ramadhan. But not during an *iftar*. Or, . . . I pause. Is this the “Modern/Western Turk” that we have been aspiring to become for the last eight decades? Is this the way the East and the West meets? Drinking wine at the Iftar table?

I wanted my colleagues to answer this question themselves. Our program included Istanbul (the West) and Konya (in some ways the East). We listened to liberal professors and conservative religious people. We had the belly dancers and the Whirling dervishes both in our program.

Our learning experience began long before we left the US. My colleagues began to read about Turkey. I began to realize that I really did not know much about my country, where I lived my entire life until 2000. So, who was I to decide what they should see or not see while in Turkey? Even the little incident of inviting a Fethullah Gulen² supporter to the University of Richmond as a speaker was an eye-opener for me. The idea was vetoed by my other Turkish colleague on campus with the justification that that group was not the Turkey image we wanted to project. Although I was infuriated at the time (we had to hear “all” the perspectives, right?), after a while, I came to agree with this reaction because that group did not represent the “real Turks” either. Who are the Turks, then?

ISTANBUL

I am listening to Istanbul, intent, my eyes closed.

The Grand Bazaar's serene and cool,

An uproar at the hub of the Market,

Mosque yards are full of pigeons.

While hammers bang and clang at the docks

Spring winds bear the smell of sweat;

I am listening to Istanbul, intent, my eyes closed.

Orhan Veli

Our first stop was, of course, the great Turkish poet Orhan Veli’s Istanbul. Our hotel was the famous Pera Palace, which Agatha Christie mentions in one of her books because of its association with the Orient Express. The neighborhood was the famous “Beyoglu”, the

² Fethullah Gulen is the leader of the Fundamentalist Islam movement in Turkey.

subject of songs, poems, and an article in the New York Times's Travel section as the "only genuine bohemian neighborhood in all the Muslim [Middle East](#)³". We were a few steps away from the famous Istiklal street that led to Beyoglu described as "Beyoglu feels a little like SoHo in early 80's New York. As though something's happening, and something's changing".

Ilka and I walk on Istiklal street
 Among the crowds.
 I "detox" in the bustling crowd of Istiklal street.
 The crowd looks different somehow,
 but then it still feels the same
 to be among them.

Our Istanbul experience started with a very interesting dinner that included a boat trip:

First night in Istanbul
 And I am closing my eyes to hear Istanbul just like the poet did.
 Cool, a little windy, invigorating, energizing and my heart chills
 After the long flight.
 My eyes rest on the minarets, the lights, the waves.
 We all inhale the scent of the Marmara sea. I, with my heart.
 They, with their senses. They smell, taste, hear Istanbul.
 But do they feel it?
 Does it touch a spot so tender that it aches?

We ate at a restaurant in the Maiden's Tower (*Kız Kulesi*)⁴ that dates back to 341 BC. The history is lost in this very elegant, completely European restaurant with the Western music and the singer who performed in many languages. I turned to our organizer and asked "Wouldn't it be nicer if we listened to some Turkish Music? His response "Oh, they (my colleagues) won't enjoy that kind of music" should have been the first warning when I insisted that we go somewhere which is more "Turkish". Thus we ended up in the *KervanSaray* the next evening. I was simply horrified at the Turkey image these people were selling. Not only the belly dancers, but the two young girls who went from table to table to have their pictures taken. One man, two women. What kind of oriental fantasy was this they were getting money out of? I do not know what made me more upset that evening. Maybe the food (not Turkish, not "food"). Maybe the breasts of the belly dancers that landed on the heads of all the male customers. Maybe the music (disco, 60's). Or the fact that most tourists, diplomats, and businesspeople are proudly taken to this place for a taste of Turkey. Was this the Turkey I wanted share with my colleagues: This greed for money at the expense of values, quality, and traditions? One of my colleagues said this happens in all the touristy places. It was not a relief.

³ In Istanbul, Contemporary Art Blooms Amid a Thousand Minarets. Lee Smith, August 28, 2005

⁴ <http://www.kizkulesi.com.tr/en/collection/default.asp>

What happens when a Pole, a German, a Turk, and an American go to a Turkish *hamam*? Nothing really. They all get the same treatment. Hot water, massage, and relaxation. Even though most Turks don't go to these Turkish Baths anymore, I do not feel uncomfortable about this touristy activity. It was part of our history and traditions after all.

Ankara: "Should the Army move out from Ankara"?

Very recently, a deputy from the AKP party suggested that the Turkish Army was taking too much space in the capital, Ankara and, of course, he got very negative comments from the Turkish people. The reason for the Turks' negative reaction is very simple. Turks love their army. The army is the only institution that is not corrupt, and for many the army is the only guarantee for a secular Turkey, for Turkish Democracy. Our meeting at the Ministry of National Defense gave us an opportunity to see why.

So, what happens when two women from former communist countries, one woman from a Muslim country, one American anthropologist interested in Sufism, a Lebanese origin American man, a Romanian Economist, and five bearded and well-dressed American professors meet with high ranking officers from the Turkish Army and ask questions about the Armenian problem, the Kurdish issue, and the fundamental Islam in Turkey? Nothing really. They all get the same answers. Straightforward, clever, frank, and well-prepared answers.

My uncle

In my struggle to show a kaleidoscopic picture of Turkey, I included a visit to my Uncle's house. My uncle's family still lived in the neighborhood in which I grew up, one of the poorest neighborhoods of Ankara, in a gecekondu².

When I was a little girl, I never liked my uncle. I called him the Humeyni of Turkey. With his trimmed beard and never-ending prayers, with his rules and list of sins. I never liked the fact that I was not allowed to wear pants, or skirts that were shorter than the ankle length just because of him. I was not allowed to put on nail polish. I was not allowed to drink coke (it was expensive anyway). Margarine was not *halal* (acceptable) because it had pork in it. His daughters had to wear the burka; black and ugly. He was a scary man. Or he was a scared man trying to protect his family. I didn't know until recently.

I never understood why he would spend hours and hours copying the Quran without a clue about their meaning. I never understood why this man would cry like a baby as he listened to a passionate, aggressive imam talk on a cassette. I never forgot that the minute you entered their living room, the first thing one saw was the question "What did you do for Allah today?" and the big picture of the journey between the cradle and

² gecekondu The majority of urban areas of the large cities in Turkey consist of squatter settlements (gecekondu). Gecekondu, by definition, is a process whereby the lower income groups, mainly people from the countryside, incapable of finding a solution to their housing needs within the rules and standards set by society, proceed to solve it illegitimately through their own resources and efforts. The term gecekondu means 'to land by night' and thereby appropriately depicts the speed and stealth of the construction process.

the grave. I loved his wife, my aunt, and my cousins. But I never understood my uncle until I saw him through the lens of my colleague Michael Spears in May 2005. The man in the picture was almost saint like. Old. White beard. No teeth. Beautiful smile. Sad eyes. Pale face. Kind heart. Almost waiting for the last stop in this life. Here was my uncle. And I had to see him through the eyes of my colleagues. I had never been proud of him until that day when he gave each of us prayer beads that he himself had carved. Us. The *gavur*'s (infidels) and me. The black sheep in the family. The one who went to college, who had a divorce, who married a non-Muslim, and the one who was worse than a "*gavur*".

Is this the Turkey I wanted to share? Holding on to beliefs, tradition, values, but accepting and open. Not rural anymore and not urban yet. Not the East nor the West. Which identity is this? Sub-identity, supra-identity? But of course, the answer to this question from a *gecekondu* resident would simply be "Fuck the *alt*⁵ (sub) and the *üst* (supra). I need to feed my family". Maybe it is this difference that I wanted to show. While the politicians and the intellectuals are engaged in levels of identity, 50 percent of the Turkish population tries to survive in the *gecekondu*'s (and they are always invisible to the tourist groups).

Despite being physically distant for five years and intellectually closer than ever, I thought I could help my colleagues to see Turkey from my kaleidoscope and see all the colors and shapes by including different perspectives and places. But then, we never had the opportunity to meet and talk with any Kurds, Armenians, Jews, or apolitical religious people. The identity we were presented with was probably the EU identity that we've been trying to fit into. My fear was that this was really a "telescopic" approach.

The best example for the "telescopic" presentation of a topic can be found in Jennifer Nourse's (2005) analysis of the veiled women in Turkey. The national education in Turkey provides an interesting perspective for the Turkish citizens. It is a distant, oversimplified and "bright" picture of the past: "Ataturk came along and saved us from a dark past and gave us a promising future. He emancipated women and women embraced this overnight. Women who do cover their heads now are either rural women or the extremists, and they don't fit Ataturk's vision of "Modern" Turkey." However, the reality is more complicated and when Nourse is given the "simple" version by our guide, she refuses to accept this explanation and, instead, writes a very interesting analysis of this "veil" phenomenon.

The ultimate question at this point becomes not who the Turks are but as John Gordon (2005) asks in his report: "How well do modern Turks really know Atatürk or understand his principles?"

Since Turks seemed to define their identity with Ataturk, I believe it is in order to provide some background.

Ataturk tried to create a Turkey in his own image. Modern. Western. Atheist. Educated. Ambitious. He had the right circumstances and the time to do this. It all began with the invasion of Turkey after the WWII. When the Greeks occupied Izmir, it was the last straw. Something had to be done. That something was the *Kurtuluş* (Liberation) War.

⁵ *Alt* literally means "lower part" and *üst* means "upper part".

Although the Turkish people were physically and psychologically weak after seven years with three wars ending in defeats, there were several factors that led to this war and the subsequent Turkish victory. First, there were several organizations that promoted the independence of the country. These organizations were established all over the country, and they supported the fight for independence. Furthermore, many young soldiers were restless because of the occupation of the country. These young men were educated in the “Westernized” schools of the Ottoman Empire, and they were influenced by Turkish nationalist authors and the French revolution with its Declaration of Human Rights. Mango (2002) states that these future leaders of the Turkish nationalistic resistance movement were contemporaries at the Istanbul War College, and “it was thus in the classrooms of the War college and of the Staff College that the war for Turkey’s independence was won” (Mango, 2002, p. 48). Additionally, the Turkish people had found a leader. One of the young successful commanders was Mustafa Kemal Atatürk who led this war. He brought victory, and “he accomplished this by bringing together elements of resistance that had already emerged. He coordinated their efforts, expressed their goals, personified their ambitions, and led them to victory” (Shaw & Shaw, 1975, p. 340).

The journey to victory was not easy by any means, and many individuals were involved. Edip (1928)⁶ states that “All through the ordeal for independence the Turkish people itself has been the supreme hero – the Turkish people has honored Mustafa Kemal Pasha as its symbol” (p. 407). She, herself, had actively participated in the war from the very beginning by delivering a speech in Istanbul in which she uttered her famous statement, “when the night is darkest and seems eternal, the light of the dawn is nearest” (p. 27). In addition to helping to inspire hope and bring a sense of unity, she observed the war first hand alongside Atatürk and İsmet İnönü as a sergeant whose duty was to record the events during the war⁷. Since she spoke English, she was also the translator. Her intimate portrayal of the war and its leaders display the difficulties that the Turkish people had to go through, and her portrayal also helps us understand Mustafa Kemal. One incident she wrote in her *Turkish Ordeal* sheds interesting light to Mustafa Kemal’s vision for Turkey. She wrote that she had translated the speech of a British statesman on the “Big Stick policy” for the East. When Atatürk read it,

He flew into one of the most violent rages I have ever seen him in and said “They shall know that we are as good as they are! They shall treat us as their equal! Never will we bow our heads to them! To our last man we will stand against them till we break civilization on their heads!” Rhetorical as this may sound today, the “we” and the “us” had some meaning then, though he may have been unconscious of it. It was as if the whole East were crying out in his voice. (1928, p. 149)

However, she also asserts that “Compared to the future and the destiny of the Turkish people which they themselves would shape out of their undying vitality, Mustafa Kemal Pasha was one single wave in a mighty sea” (p. 356).

⁶ Her autobiography is available at UR library.

⁷ He was a commander during the war; Later served as Prime minister and President of Turkey.

Ataturk was well-informed about the history of his country, and most important of all, he had a great sense of timing (for a detailed account of Atatürk's life see Andrew Mango's Atatürk, 2001).

After the war, the new Turkish State was established with the meeting of the Turkish Grand National Assembly on April 23, 1920. The Assembly abolished the office of the Sultan on November 1, 1922, thus ending 631 years of Ottoman rule. Mango (2002) notes that after the abolition of the caliphate, Atatürk kept a low profile because "The destruction of the old order had shocked the country, but incidents of open rebellion were few" (p. 408). The main reason for this lack of reaction can be explained, perhaps, by the fact that people were busy trying to heal their wounds literally and figuratively, but Mango also observes that "popular reaction was ineffective without educated leadership" (p. 408). The nationalistic government, on the other hand, did have an educated leader, Mustafa Kemal, who did not declare the new Turkish republic immediately after the abolition of the caliphate. Instead, he waited for one year.

Even though there are many summaries, charts, outlines, and chronologies of these reforms, the following lengthy quote summarizes the spirit of the changes that started in 1923 and continued almost unabated:

The Ottoman religious leaders were pensioned off; the state assumed the task of paying the salaries of the Muslim clergy and of assigning (and if need be, reassigning) them to their posts; the mosque schools were closed; religious lessons were banned from the public schools; the Department of Divinity at Istanbul University was closed; the Muslim religious courts were abolished; the Italian criminal, Swiss civil, and German commercial codes were adopted; clergy were prohibited from wearing ecclesiastical attire on the streets; the mystic dervish religious orders were banned; the tombs of holy men were closed to pilgrimage and praying; polygamy was abolished (at least in the eyes of the civil law); a civil marriage rite was made obligatory (although religious rites could be held in addition); women gained the right of initiating divorce proceedings and were protected from the summary divorce proceedings which Islamic law permits to husbands; women were strongly discouraged, but not prohibited, from wearing the veil; men were prohibited from wearing turbans and fezzes, symbols in Kemal's eyes of Middle-Eastern Islamic backwardness; women got the vote and the right to stand for office, and were elected to Parliament; the Islamic time and calendar systems were replaced by the international ones; Sunday, rather than Friday (the main day for Muslim congregational worship), was made the day of rest; the metric system was introduced; alcoholic beverages were made legal for Muslims to drink. (Loomis, 1984, p. 30-31)

These changes and more were implemented in about ten years. Ten years. This abrupt transformation had to have backlashes, and nowadays, the Turkish people seem to be in an endeavor to remember collectively what had been deleted from their memory with national education.

Beginning in 1920, education was made available to everyone, all the schools were unified, the alphabet was changed, schools were secularized, the language was "purified," education experts were invited to Turkey, Turkish students were sent to western countries

to study educational practices, books were translated into Turkish, and most important of all, a new national identity was created with the help of a new curriculum. Eskicumali (1994) wrote: “Starting with the war of national independence, this revolution did not only change social, political, and cultural institutions in Turkey but also introduced a “new” mentality, outlook and value system to the Turkish society” (p.101). He also adds, “Education undoubtedly played one of the most important roles in this transformation” (p. 101).

Although the education system underwent changes during the Ottoman Period, the new government introduced fresh principles, which would later be referred to as Kemalist principles. The six principles formed the framework for the revolutions, and later constituted part of Mustafa Kemal’s Republican People’s Party².

Summary of Kemalist Principles

Principle	Summary
Republicanism	Turkey is governed by democratic principles, and the “Sovereignty Belongs to the Nation”. People ruled themselves.
Nationalism	Respect for a common “Turkish” identity, national history and future.
Populism	The people will govern the Turkish nation. Egalitarian nation.
Secularism	Separation of state and Islam. Governance based on science and knowledge. Freedom of thought.
Reformism	Keeping up with the developments in science and technology.
Statism	The primary goal of the state is to elevate the economy of Turkish Republic to the level of developed countries.

Although many sources argue that the Kemalist principles guided the reforms, it must be noted that from the outset Atatürk and his associates did not know exactly what these principles were. Childress (2001) argues that even though Kemalism “is treated as if it emerged at the time of the Turkish Revolution as a mature ideology ready to be injected as a whole into the systems, such as education, targeted for reform by the government” (p. 1), a more accurate observation is that it “was, for much of the 1920s and 1930s, fragmented principles and ideals, not a coherent ideology guiding reforms. The process of articulating Kemalism as an ideology took place in a variety of settings such as ceremonies celebrating the state and the nation, in the formulation of RPP programs, and in the educational system” (p. 1). This argument had been put forth earlier in 1976 by Shaw & Shaw who stated that these principles emerged from the “debates

² For a detailed and interesting discussion of these principles, see Dumont’s “The origins of Kemalist Ideology” in Landau’s *Atatürk and the Modernization of Turkey* (1984)

among the Easternists and Westernists during the early days of the Grand National Assembly” (p. 375).

Atatürk knew that education had to be improved, but there were no clear goals. Mango wrote about one evening when “Conversation suddenly turned to education, as Mustafa Kemal told Ismet, “you must improve education, starting right at the beginning” (p. 440). The most important factor in the new education was the group of pedagogues who created the new system. “A Westernized elite made up of secularized intellectuals and bureaucrats took charge of reforming education” (Childress, 2001, p. 65).

My colleague John Gordon writes (2005): “Atatürk’s revered status in contemporary Turkey is an enigma. Given the claim that 99 percent of Turkey’s population is Muslim, the intensity of Muslim fundamentalists such as those we heard speak in Istanbul, the pervasive calls to prayer, and the widespread covering of women’s hair, especially outside the larger more cosmopolitan cities, it seems paradoxical that Turks honor a figure who was an atheist, who lived a libertine life and died of cirrhosis of the liver, and who diminished the public role of Islam in Turkish society.” The answer is in the national education.

Starting from the first grade, we learn to love Atatürk. During the Ottoman Empire, children educated in the mosque schools memorized the Quran without knowing its meaning. During the Republic, we memorized and still memorize poems about Atatürk, his life, his revolutions, his blue eyes, and the story in which he gets rid of the crows in his uncles farm. He became our “religion” as one of our speakers said. In a sense, this is true. Although Turkey is 99% Muslim, Islam is not taught in Turkey. Not at Government schools (secularism), not at Mosque schools (banned), not in the families. We grow up learning our history after 1923 by heart. In college, I remember taking a history course that taught the history of the Republic. The only thing I remember from that course is that our professor did not allow covered female students to attend his classes.

We do not know what Atatürk is. Maybe that’s the underlying issue in this identity crisis.

And my colleagues have used their telescopes, microscopes, and kaleidoscopes as well as their cameras in order to understand Turkey. Now, it is our turn.

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