

Turkey Faces West

Rebuffed by the European Union, angered by U.S. policies in the Middle East, and governed by an Islamist political party, Turkey seems to have every reason to turn its back on the West. To most Turks, however, that would be inconceivable.

BY SOLI ÖZEL

IN MOST COUNTRIES, THE NEWS THAT ONE OF their own has been awarded a Nobel Prize is an occasion for universal pride and self-congratulation. That was not the case when the renowned Turkish novelist Orhan Pamuk received the Nobel Prize for Literature this past October. Many Turks still angrily remembered Pamuk's controversial assertion in a Swiss newspaper in 2005 that "a million Armenians and thirty thousand Kurds have been killed in this land," which provided fodder for allegations that Ottoman Turkey had committed genocide against Armenians during and after World War I. The Turkish government scandalously put Pamuk on trial for defaming "Turkishness," provoking a public outcry in Turkey and abroad before he won acquittal in 2006. When the news of the Nobel broke, some Turks could barely hide their resentment and spite. For them the prize was simply a function of Pamuk's political views, which, in their view, he had expressed only to curry favor in the West and secure the Nobel.

Those with clearer minds rejoiced in Pamuk's accomplishment. By honoring him, the Swedish

Academy had acknowledged the Western part of modern Turkey's identity. It cited his literary achievements as a master novelist who transformed the literary form and in the process helped to make East and West more intelligible to each other. Still, the unhealthy reaction by a sizable portion of the Turkish public spoke volumes about the country's current state of mind toward the West.

The West certainly has given Turks a great deal to think about. Indeed, less than two hours before the Academy notified Pamuk of the great honor he had received, the French National Assembly staged its own crude attack on freedom of expression by passing a resolution making it a crime to deny that Ottoman Turkey was guilty of genocide against the Armenians. In September came Pope Benedict XVI's infamous lecture at the University of Regensburg, in which he infuriated Muslims around the world by quoting a Byzantine emperor: "Show me just what Muhammad brought that was new, and there you will find things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached." Then, in mid-December, came the cruelest cut of all. The European Union announced the suspension of negotiations on eight of 35 policy issues

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On a street in central Istanbul, International Women's Day 2005 created a *mélange* of contradictory and paradoxical images typical of modern Turkey.

that must be addressed before Turkey can complete the long EU accession process begun in 2004, bringing accession to a virtual halt. Even worse from the Turkish perspective was the intensity with which some European states suddenly objected to Turkey's membership, a matter that presumably had been settled in 2004. Many Turks saw the decision as yet another example of the EU's double standard in its dealings with its Muslim applicant.

“COOL ISTANBUL,” as the global media sometimes calls it, is a center for investment capital from East and West.

In the past when the Turks were upset with Europe, they turned to the United States. Ankara and Washington have a history of close relations dating to the Cold War, when the Soviet Union loomed menacingly over its southern neighbor. Turkish troops fought alongside the Americans during the Korean War, and Turkey joined NATO in 1952. In the post-Cold War era, the United States was an enthusiastic supporter of the recently completed Baku-Ceyhan pipeline that carries oil from Azerbaijan to the Turkish port of Ceyhan on the Mediterranean, making Turkey a significant energy player while reducing Western dependence on Russia. When Turkey faced a severe economic crisis in 2001, the United States used its clout to convince the International Monetary Fund to assist Ankara.

But the Iraq war opened a rift. The Bush administration was embittered by Turkey's refusal to allow the deployment of U.S. troops in the country to open a northern front against Iraq. Ankara was angered by Washington's hard-nosed policies and alarmed by the potential for upheaval among its own traditionally restive Kurdish population created by events in the Kurdish areas of Iraq. And many Turks believe, along with other Muslims, that the United States is leading a crusade against Muslims. Anti-Americanism has begun to consume the Turkish public. The latest German Marshall Fund survey of transatlantic trends

found that only seven percent of Turks approve of President George W. Bush's policies.

Turkey's unique experiment in Westernization was already under intense scrutiny in the post-9/11 world, and these latest blows have led many to question whether that experiment will continue. Will the Turks drift away from the path of Westernizing modernization? The answer to this question, if it implies that Turkey may take a U-turn from its chosen path, is empathically no.

The Turkish experiment, after all, is two centuries old, having begun with the decision of Sultan Mahmud II (1784–1839) to meet the challenge of a rising Europe with a thorough reform of the Ottoman

Empire. Under Mahmud and his successors, the reforms included legal equality for all subjects of the empire, extension of private property rights, reform of the educational system, and the restructuring of the military and the notoriously ponderous Ottoman bureaucracy. With the determined leadership of Kemal Atatürk, the elite that founded the Turkish Republic on the ashes of the empire in 1923 pursued a more radical modernization, with a staunch secularism as its mainstay. Religion would be subjugated to the state and relegated strictly to the private sphere. Turkey under Atatürk replaced its alphabet and civil law virtually overnight; even the way men and women dressed was reformed.

Turkish democracy traces its practical origins to 1950, when an opposition party defeated the incumbent Republican Party and peacefully assumed power. As politicians became more responsive to popular sentiment, religion returned to the public realm and the Turkish military took it upon itself to serve as the primary custodian of the secular republican order. In its name, the army staged four direct or indirect military interventions; the last of these was the so-called postmodern coup of February 28, 1997, in which it mobilized public opinion and the news media to force



Urbanites make the scene on Bagdat Street, an upscale boulevard on the Asian side of Istanbul known for its elegant stores, banks, and restaurants.

the resignation of a coalition government led by the Islamist Welfare Party.

Yet significant political and economic changes were under way by the beginning of the 1990s. In the past decade and a half, the country has progressed in modernizing its economy, liberalizing its political system, and deepening its democratic order. Trade, financial flows, and investment increasingly integrate Turkey into world markets. Office towers are rising over Istanbul, which has recovered the cosmopolitan reputation it enjoyed in Ottoman times. “Cool Istanbul,” as the global media sometimes call it, is a center for investment capital from East and West, a gateway to Central Asia, and a magnet for affluent sophisticates drawn by its prosperity, its spectacular nightlife, and its museums and other cultural riches.

Throughout Turkey, the burgeoning market economy is rapidly breaking down traditional economic habits and drawing in ordinary Turks, breeding more individualistic attitudes and spreading middle-class values, even as many embrace religious piety. The

results can be paradoxical. In a recent survey by the Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation, 45 percent of Turks identified themselves first as Muslims rather than Turks, up from 36 percent in 1999. Yet support for the adoption of sharia—Islamic law—fell from 21 percent to nine percent, and the percentage of women who said they wore an Islamic headscarf declined by more than a quarter, to 11.4 percent. It is no small part of the Turkish paradox that the rush toward reform and the EU is being led by the Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP), which won control of parliament in November 2002 and installed the current prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the following March.

All of these changes have been accompanied by a somewhat painful process of self-inspection. International conferences held in Turkey on the tragic fate of the Ottoman Empire’s Armenian population, the status of the Kurds (the country’s main ethnic minority), and the role of Islam in modern Turkey’s social and political life are emblematic of the new

openness. Turkish society is increasingly pluralistic. After decades of state control, there are now more than 300 television and 1,000 radio stations on the air, broadcasting everything from hard rock to Turkish folklore, from BBC reports to Islamic and Kurdish newscasts. The questioning of established dogmas has generated intense debates. Turkish modernity, long a top-down phenomenon directed by the heirs of Atatürk, is being reshaped and redefined at the societal level. Inevitably, tensions, contradictions, and disagreements over the nation's direction abound.

The Turkish debate over Westernization has never been a winner-take-all contest between supposedly pure Westernizers and retrograde Muslims. The strategic aim of Atatürk and other founding fathers of the Turkish Republic in 1923 was to be part of the European system of states, just as the Ottomans had been. Yet even among committed Westernizers there were lines that could not be transgressed, and suspicions that could not be erased when it came to deal-

ing with the West. After all, the Republic had been founded after a bitter struggle amid the rubble of the empire against occupying Western armies. Its founding myths had an undertone of anti-imperialist cum anti-Western passion.

In his remarkable book of autobiographical essays on his hometown, *Istanbul: Memories and the City* (2005), Orhan Pamuk observes that “when the empire fell, the new Republic, while certain of its purpose, was unsure of its identity; the only way forward, its founders thought, was to foster a new concept of Turkishness, and this meant a certain *cordon sanitaire* to shut it off from the rest of the world. It was the end of the grand polyglot multicultural Istanbul of the imperial age. . . . The cosmopolitan Istanbul I knew as a child had disappeared by the time I reached adulthood.”

In all his work, Pamuk reflects on the Turkish ordeal of Westernization. In *Istanbul*, he notes that



Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan and his pro-Western, Islamist Justice and Development Party draw support from traditionalists and the rising middle class.

“with the drive to Westernize and the concurrent rise of Turkish nationalism, the love-hate relationship with the Western gaze became all the more convoluted.” The Republic sought to Westernize, be part of the European universe, but kept its guard up against Western encroachments and did not quite trust its partners-to-be. Today, the nationalist reflexes of Atatürk’s heirs—the secularist republican elites in the military, the judiciary, the universities, and among the old professional and bureaucratic classes—arguably play as large a role in the blossoming anti-Western sentiment as the Islamist political parties and the more religious segment of the population. These old elites are keenly aware of their ebbing power amid the transformative effects of the market economy and democratization.

Yet it is also easy to overstate the degree of anti-Western animus. Ordinarily, the Turkish public sees itself as a mediator between “civilizations,” to use the fashionable term of the day, and believes profoundly in its historical right to such a role. This self-confidence is a function of its long association with the West and the secular-democratic nature of its political order. As if to illustrate this sense of mission, Prime Minister Erdoğan stood on a podium in Istanbul this past November beside his Spanish counterpart, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero—in symbolic terms, the two heirs to leadership of the contending Muslim and Christian superpowers of the past—along with UN secretary general Kofi Annan, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, and former Iranian president Muhammad Khatami, to launch the idea of an “Alliance of Civilizations.”

Pope Benedict’s highly publicized visit to Turkey in December offered a more surprising illustration of the limits of Turkish anti-Westernism. Erdoğan, a strong critic of the pope’s Regensburg speech who also has a politician’s exquisite sensitivity to the public mood, initially decided to stay away from the country while Benedict was there. Once the debate in

Turkey intensified, however, those who believed that the prime minister had to meet with this important visitor gained the upper hand. Erdoğan rescheduled his departure for a NATO summit in Latvia and, in a gesture that took everyone by surprise, greeted the pope on the tarmac.

The visit itself went exceedingly well (except for the residents of Ankara and Istanbul, who suffered the torturous inconveniences of maximum security for the pope). Protest rallies organized by funda-

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mentalist political parties failed to draw the predicted multitudes, and widely feared disruptions by radical groups did not materialize. Benedict met with Turkey’s highest official religious leader, Professor Ali Bardakoğlu, and removed his shoes and faced Mecca to pray alongside Istanbul’s most senior religious official at the famed Blue Mosque. Most remarkably, the pope, who spoke in Turkish on several occasions, reportedly told the prime minister that he looked favorably upon Turkey’s accession to the EU—an extraordinary turnabout for a man who had vehemently objected to such an eventuality when he was a cardinal. His earlier vision of the EU, shared by many Europeans, was of a Christian union rather than one in which membership is obtained when objective and secular criteria are fulfilled.

It was a supreme irony that just as the pope was giving such warm messages, the EU was preparing to deliver its blow, virtually slamming the door on what has been Turkey’s great national object—a project that has enjoyed the steady support of some 70 percent of the population.

Ostensibly, the break is a result of Turkey’s refusal to open its seaports and airports to traffic from the Greek part of Cyprus, because of the still-unresolved

conflict between it and the Turkish north. But most EU insiders acknowledge that this is a fig leaf behind which France, the Netherlands, Denmark, and other countries are trying to conceal their desire to keep Muslim Turkey out of the Union.

For many Turks (as others), entry into the EU is not just the final destination of a journey they undertook a long time ago. It is also a test of Europe's own universalist and multiculturalist claims, a symbol of the prospects for harmonious relations between different faiths. A snubbing of Turkey that

provincial entrepreneurs who had prospered in the newly competitive and open economy. They were part of a globalizing economy, and were eager to get a bigger share of the economic pie and to pursue EU membership. Also attracted to the AKP were the recent arrivals from the countryside, who lived and worked on the periphery of the major cities and suddenly found themselves with new and different interests.

The AKP won an overwhelming majority in the 2002 parliamentary elections. The exhaustion of

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the established elites—in particular, their failure to manage the Turkish economy and reform the political system to make it more responsive to the demands of a fast-modernizing society—along with the electorate's desire to punish the

is perceived as religiously based will have repercussions throughout the Muslim world, including Europe's own Muslim immigrant communities. In the words of the *Newsweek* correspondent in Istanbul, "Not so long ago, it seemed that Europe would overcome prejudice and define itself as an ideology rather than a geography, a way of being in the world rather than a mere agglomeration of nation-states. But that chance is now lost."

Yet it is hardly the case that all is lost for Turkey, or that it must now turn its back on the West. The transformations of recent decades have put the country firmly on a modernizing path, as the example of the governing AKP itself illustrates. Founded by current prime minister Erdoğan, Abdullah Gül (his foreign minister), and others, the AKP grew out of a split in the Islamist movement in the 1990s. Erdoğan and his allies in the younger generation broke away from the more conservative and ideological (and anti-EU) group. The AKP retained a great deal of support from the traditional constituencies of the Islamist parties. But there was now a new and dynamic constituency that made a bid for increased power in the economic and political system. Turkey's market reforms had propelled a new generation of

incumbents, played a prominent role in the AKP's success. The promise the party's rise to power held for a better, more inclusive, less corrupt future, rather than the appeal of an ideological call for an Islamic order, won the elections for the AKP. Post-election data showed that half of its support came from voters who had backed secular parties in previous elections. And in its market-oriented economic policies and acceptance of some liberal political principles, the AKP represented a break from the traditional Islamist parties of earlier decades.

Despite its numerous shortcomings (such as its habit of appointing ideological kin rather than qualified personnel to top jobs), the AKP mostly has remained true to its electoral platform, to the surprise of many abroad. Seeking to accelerate Turkey's progress through the EU accession process, it has taken big steps toward political liberalization, civilian control of the military, and consolidation of the rule of law. The example it sets therefore stands as the antithesis of the Islamic order in Al Qaeda's imagination. Still, in the eyes of many the AKP remains suspect because of its origins, its cliquish and ideologically motivated appointments, and the decidedly faith-based cultural preferences of its lead-

ing figures—whose wives, for example, wear the Islamic headscarf. Some critics even detect a dangerous tilt in Ankara's foreign policy. Particularly controversial was the visit by Khalid Meshal, a leader of Hamas, after the Palestinian elections, just when the West was trying to isolate Hamas and force it to renounce terrorism and recognize Israel's right to exist. And Turkey has drawn the ire of some in Washington for remaining on good terms with its Syrian and Iranian neighbors—a choice that may look different now that the Iraq Study Group has recommended dialogue with those two countries.

Some of the AKP's critics charge that one more term under the party will leave Turkey less secular, somewhat less democratic, and decidedly non-Western. This is unfair and untrue. Whatever its failings, the party represents something new in Turkish life. Indeed, if one were to speak of fundamentalism with respect to the AKP and its constituents, "market fundamentalism" would have to hold pride of place. The "creative destruction" of Turkey's vibrant capitalism has transformed sleepy provincial towns such as Kayseri, Denizli, Malatya, and Konya, and integrated them into the global markets. Producing consumer goods, machinery, textiles, furniture, and ceramics for export to Europe, the United States, the Middle East, and Central Asia, they have been enriched and exposed to the wider world. The new social mobility has made the conservative weft of the country's cultural fabric more visible and poignant. Partly because Turkish institutions did little to ease the transition, mobility reinforced communitarian tendencies. An ineffective state and a sluggish banking sector that was slow to reach out to credit-starved businesspeople left many Turks with nowhere to turn but to networks based on kin, faith, and community.

At the same time, the newly acquired wealth created demands for the rewards of consumer society. Women in the conservative Muslim middle classes dressed modestly and wore headscarves but eagerly shopped for the latest look at Islamic fashion shows. Seaside hotels with facilities allowing the separation of the sexes at the beach sprang up to accommodate the newly affluent. The children of the new middle classes, both sons and daughters, registered

in the best of schools and often went abroad, mostly to Western countries (preferably the United States), to get their college degrees or their MBAs.

Despite the EU's crude rebuff, Turkey's multifaceted modernization will continue. The impact of global integration and ongoing economic and political reforms will still ripple through Turkish society, and the transformation will also strain Turkey's social fault lines. A widening sphere of freedom and democratic engagement brings forth demands from long-suppressed groups—from Kurds to environmentalists—and, as in all such cases, triggers a reaction. Yet these are all the birth pangs of a more modern Turkey that will remain European while redefining itself, even if Europe cannot yet grasp this process and its significance. If it manages its transformations wisely, Turkey will indeed become, as Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush have both predicted, one of the key countries shaping the 21st century.

In awarding the Nobel Prize to Pamuk, the Swedish Academy cited his rendering of Istanbul's melancholy in his work. The Turkish word for this is *hüzün*. "The *hüzün* of Istanbul," Pamuk writes, "is not just the mood evoked by its music and its poetry, it is a way of looking at life that implicates us all, not only a spiritual state but a state of mind that is ultimately as life-affirming as it is negating." This *hüzün*, he says later, "suggests nothing of an individual standing against society: on the contrary, it suggests an erosion of the will to stand against the values and mores of the community and encourages us to be content with little, honoring the virtues of harmony, uniformity, humility."

Arguably the *hüzün* of Istanbul is no more. At best, it is on its way out. The cosmopolitan city of different ethnicities and religious affiliations and many languages that Pamuk knew is indeed long gone. A new cosmopolitanism, that of financial services and multinational corporations, advertisers and artists, oil men and real estate agents, is rapidly filling the gap. Individuals of all colors who partake of it exude self-confidence and are unlikely to be "content with little." They will want to take on the world. ■