

Crescent Moon Rising:
My Summer in the Turkish Republic
By Nathaniel Rosenblatt

Introduction:

With thanks to the Franklin Center/Clinger grant, I spent two months in Turkey this summer enrolled in classes and Turkish language study at Bogazici University in Istanbul. While at the university and in Istanbul, I made connections that helped me better understand Turkish politics and US-Turkey relations. What made this summer particularly interesting were the parliamentary elections of July 22nd, 2006. During my time in Turkey, I was fortunate to meet many interesting people and converse about their country, its politics and identity. I tried to get a wide demographic range, and this involved engaging in as many conversations with strangers as possible, on its own an interesting endeavor. This in-the-field knowledge combined with extensive research, both in Turkey and at home, led me to write an overall assessment of Turkey's potential in international politics.

Based on this, I have crystallized three issues that I believe compose the core of Turkey's standing in the world today. First is Turkey's geopolitical importance. The city of the 'Sublime Porte,' has been an epicenter throughout history. With roots reaching back to the Roman Empire, the Byzantines and then the Ottomans, three great empires called Constantinople -later Istanbul-home. Apart from this, Turkey bears the brunt of an ongoing assault from Russia, who continues its search for a warm water port. Its long Mediterranean coastline is a resort haven frequented by the wealth of Europe. It borders the Balkan states which connect it to the EU, and it borders Middle Eastern states vital to American interests: Iraq, Iran Syria and Lebanon. Finally, Turkey's connection with countries to the north, Azerbaijan and Georgia, is rising in importance as natural gas is collected from the newfound reserves of the Caspian Sea. Turkey has and always will be important in international relations based solely on its geographic location and boundaries. The second vital link in the chain for Turkey's global importance is its economy. Turkey has great potential for economic growth. There are remnants of the tightly state controlled and monitored industries from Ataturk's aggressive modernization of the early years of the Turkish Republic. Since 1990, as the grip of the government slowly releases major industries into the global economy, many have been successful. Furthermore, Turkey has impressively diverse economic connections, which can form the basis for prosperous political relationships. The third important link in the chain is its biggest question mark, Turkey's domestic politics. Turkey's recent political developments are fascinating for students of JR. Since its conversion from the Ottoman state to the Turkish Republic, the proponents of secularism (or Kemalism after the modern country's founder, Kemal Ataturk) have controlled Turkey's political climate. In the last decade however, this atmosphere is undergoing an incredible change. Led by the majority AK Parti, which has undeniably Islamic undertones, religion is reentering Turkey's political system. Where the country goes with this new political force and how the country transitions from its previous life of an imposed secularism to a more open political system will determine where it will stand on the international stage in the post cold war system. This is the biggest question mark for Turkey's development, and we will spend a significant time at the end analyzing the recent elections in Turkey, and how it plays in to the fight over Turkey's identity.

Geopolitics: Forever Important

Since the birth of the city as Byzantium in 667 BC on the advice of the Oracle at Delphi, the importance of Istanbul in international politics cannot be understated, and there are few cities that hold greater geopolitical importance throughout history. Today, Istanbul is a city where twenty minutes and one *Yeni Turk Lirasi* (New

Turkish Lira-YTL) offers a ferry ride across continents. This 'gateway city' has led to a fusion of cultures and many clashes of interests. Turkey will never be irrelevant, as its geopolitical importance is too vital to ignore by the major powers in the world.

West of Istanbul lies Eastern Thrace, the remnants of the Ottoman Empire's foray into Europe. This piece of Turkey borders Greece and the Balkan states, the eastern frontier of the European Union. Since the beginning of the Ottoman Empire, Turks have always maintained a relationship with European powers. Even today, Turks who brag about how the great Sultan Suleiman marched on the gates of Vienna are not hard to find. During the twentieth century, Turkey was a check on European power states, primarily against the Soviet Union's attempts at controlling the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits waterways connecting their Black Sea ports to the Mediterranean. Today, Turkey's relationship with European powers continues to be one of restraint vis-à-vis Russia. Whereas previously it was a check on territorial control, today it prevents Russian oil and gas from dominating European markets. Taking advantage of its accessibility to Europe, Turkey negotiated deals with Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Iran to send their landlocked Caspian Sea resources to Turkish ports via pipeline. European countries are encouraging the recent resource extraction in the Caspian, and will likely look to the Turks in the near future as a cheaper option to the rising costs of Russian oil and natural gas.

East of Istanbul is the rugged landscape of the Anatolian peninsula. The introduction of an Islamic empire to then Constantinople changed the dynamic of the Anatolian peninsula and sparked a special relationship between the country and the rest of the Muslim Middle East. For a time, the Ottomans were the Muslim conquerors of the Middle East, and until the turn of the century, were in control of the Muslim holy cities of Mecca and Medina. Traditionally, relationships soured after the two world wars. Having allied with the wrong side in both, Turks believe the Arabs 'stabbed them in the back' in allowing the French and British to invade and control Ottoman territory in the Middle East. This popular disdain continues today, and is especially the case with the current Turkish 'problem' of a large Kurdish population in the east. Walking around one evening I met three 10-12 year old kids to ask for directions. As we got to introductions, two of them joked that their slightly darker third friend, was Kurdish, and in response, the boy denied even the joking accusations of Kurdish ties vehemently. Much of the anti Kurdish sentiment is due to the threat of the PICK., a Kurdish terrorist group. Nevertheless, the Kurdish issue according to many represents, in the Turkish mind, a general problem of dealing with Arabs.

Despite these slightly xenophobic taxicab conversations, there are many commonalities between Turkey and the rest of the Muslim Middle East, such as the fact that Turkey is 98% Sunni Muslim. Besides the obvious religious connection, there is also a linguistic connection, and these become more noticeable the further away you travel from the major cities of Istanbul and Ankara. While in Eskisehir, a small city in the Anatolian heartland, it was not uncommon to read Arabic script scrawled on bumper stickers, or even see Arabic names for companies and products. Our hostel there, for example, was called *Hotel Shems*, shems being the Arabic word for sun. In general, much of the rural areas of the Turkish east share far more in common with Turkey's Middle Eastern neighbors than Europe in all aspects of daily life. It struck me during my excursion eastward that no matter how much Ankara and Istanbul look to the west as an example of progress, their eastern roots remain unshakeable. In my opinion, Turkey has not cultivated relations with the east because past secular governments feared an injection of Middle Eastern politics would threaten their secular identity. However, as the political system accepts moderate religious parties, Turkey's long-closed eastern gate may soon open again.

Turkish Economy: A High Ceiling

Until recently, geopolitical issues were the only reason most students of international relations mentioned Turkey. Today this is changing, and the catalyst for this change is Turkey's economic growth and reform strategy. An example of Turkey's adept global integration is the story of Turkish Airlines, or in Turkish, *Türk Hava Yolları* (THY). It was founded in 1933 as the "State Airlines Administration," and since its inception has stood out only as a pinnacle of incompetence. Kemal Ataturk once observed that he had taught his people how to do many things, but not how to serve others. He was attributed this after a waiter spilled a drink on the lap of

a foreign ambassador on an early THY flight. For a while, not much changed. The tradition of Turkish service continued, luggage was frequently misplaced and flights were consistently delayed. For a time, THY was known as the "They Hate You" airlines following a tragedy of nine fatal crashes between 1979 and 2003.

But this storyline took a turn for the better when THY became the target of reforms in 1990. Whereas previous presidents of THY were state-appointed retired generals, new appointees are Western-trained and experienced managers. Dovetailing with these new appointees is a recent push for privatization. The government sold 23% of its shares in 2004 and another 28% in 2006, putting its control over the company at 49%. In all respects, this privatization has been a successful venture. THY reported sales growth of 22% and a net profit of 28% in 2006, and its current president, Temel Kotil, claims his goal is to grow by 20% every year. Furthermore, the Association of European Airlines named THY Europe's fastest-growing airline, most punctual, and least likely to lose luggage.

Ironically, I stumbled on an expose of THY by The Economist this summer when my British Airlines flight to Heathrow arrived three hours late, causing me to miss my BA connection to Turkey. For some reason, BA placed me on a THY flight from Heathrow to Istanbul. Needless to say I was a bit unnerved, but apart from the hideous green and teal faux-leather seats, I found the ride completely enjoyable; living proof of the article I spent my 3 hour British Airlines-caused delay reading. While in Turkey, I used THY to fly domestically to Kapadokya and, at the end of my trip, to Barcelona. Based on my experience, THY surpassed most American airline companies in every department.

In many respects, the experience of Turkish Airlines represents an enticing narrative for the rest of the Turkish economy. Since Ataturk took control of the "Turkish Republic" in 1923, he forced the country on a path of modernization, much of which was controlled by a central authority. This command economy lasted for a considerable period until 1990 when the state decided to sell shares in many government-run industries, and have undergone periods of privatization since. THY is a success story, and there will certainly be failures, but the economy is moving in the right direction and will continue to do so in the coming years.

Yet privatization isn't the only positive force for economic growth in Turkey, another important element is diversity. Already Turkey's economy is incredibly diverse. This Summer it signed a major oil and gas pipeline deal with Iran. This deal, much to the chagrin of the US, provides Iran with a land line for its incredible oil resources and its stake of the natural gas from the Caspian Sea. Turkey also signed a deal with Azerbaijan, whose Caspian Sea natural gas pipeline runs through Georgia and then Turkey on its way to the Mediterranean and international markets. These two landmark deals provide the EU with a much-needed outlet from its issues with Gazprom, Russia's national oil and gas company, and make Turkey a top exporter to Europe.

But Turkey's economic relationship does not deal exclusively with Europe. It also has prosperous economic relations with Middle East countries. At the same time as channeling Iranian oil, Turkey is the biggest supplier of potable water to Israel. But the Turkish-Israeli relationship runs much deeper. In return, Israel provides Turkey with vital anti-terrorism knowledge and military technology, such as the drone spy-planes that the Israeli Air Force (IAF) monitors for the Turks on their border with Iraq. Turkey also inked an important deal with a Japanese construction company to build the first public transit metro system connecting the Asian and European sides of Istanbul. From my experiences this summer, I can say that it will be a welcomed respite from the time consuming hassle of the ferry system -currently the only way to cross the Bosphorus without a car. As Turkey's economy grows and diversifies, it will allow the country to deepen ties to many countries. While not on par with the rise of India and China, Turkey's privatization and diversification put it on the path of solid, long term economic prosperity.

Domestic Politics: The Big Question

Turkey's geopolitical status is unquestionably important, and the prospering economy is playing an important role in the country's overall growth. But Turkey still remains a secondary power on the world stage. Why? My

experience this summer leads me to believe that the intense debates of Turkey's domestic politics limit Turkey's international influence. Turkey has many important issues to address. Overshadowing these issues like a menacing thundercloud is the friction between secularists and Islamists -a storm that is today on the brink of erupting. While the thunderheads hold back, this looming threat prevents other important debates from entering public discourse. In this section, I will talk about my impressions of the secular/Islam debate and briefly discuss at the end what this means for the future of Turkish foreign relations.

There are three major political parties whose plans take Turkey in remarkably different directions. This summer, the majority party, AK Parti (Justice and Development), won a shocking 46.7% of the vote. They were expected to achieve about 35%. The secularist party, CHP (the Party of the Republic), was the victim of AK Parti's unexpected gain. They won 20.8% of the popular vote. The nationalist party, MHP (Nationalist Movement Party), collected 14.3% of the popular vote.

Digesting my summer experience following Turkish elections, I will crystallize my impressions in three points. First, Turks are very passionate about their politics. Most every political party not only has a slogan, but a song and special party symbol, and many have parties with dancing and singing in plazas throughout the city. I took a bus through the center of AK Parti headquarters after their sweeping electoral victory, and the thousands of people on the streets cheering, singing and waving all sorts of AK Parti paraphernalia blew me away. Second, I was surprised at how knowledgeable the country is about political debates. It seems like a pastime in the country is to spend an entire evening drinking tea, smoking cigarettes, and talking politics. Finally, while Turks are passionate and knowledgeable, they hardly hold their candidates accountable for their stump speeches. Some of these campaign promises resemble what one might find in a high school election. While not pledging to change the water fountains to Kool-Aid dispensers, candidates did promise to lower the price of diesel to 1 YTL, or about 75 cents, per liter, double subsidies to farmers, and to increase minimum wage from YTL 402 to YTL 2,000. One newspaper joked that a politician promised to decrease the cost of diesel, increase pensions and shorten pregnancy to three months. There seems to be little real accountability for politicians who make such outlandish statements. Nevertheless, I found the political atmosphere far more passionate and demanding than my involvement in American politics at home.

While AK Parti's religious affiliations create quite a stir, most Turks do not mind an Islamic tinge to their government, and many consider Islam a party of every day life. However, AK Parti has an appeal even for those do not pray five times a day. Many are encouraged by the economic progress of the country under AK Parti leadership, and a great deal of people I spoke with voted for AK Parti despite its religious undertones. Furthermore, and what surprised me from my American perspective, AK Parti's Islamist platform is seen by some as less intrusive than the policies of the secularist party, CHP. One popular gripe is over the wearing of the *hijab*, or headscarf. Currently, the Turkish government has a ban on women wearing headscarves in public offices such as universities and hospitals. Proponents of the policy argue it separates religion and state, but to many it represents an intrusion of privacy and personal rights. While the law was upheld in a recent case at the European Court of Human Rights, the issue remains contentious. While at Bogazici University, I met a film student who did a short piece on the hijab controversy. Based on a true story, she recreated events where a young female student with college aspirations is banned from her school of choice because she insists on wearing a headscarf. To compromise her religious beliefs and the law, the girl dramatically shaves off her hair and promptly enrolls in school. The hijab controversy is highly visible and symbolic. Currently, the row over this law centers on the wife of appointed president Aptullah Gul, who wears a hijab to the outrage of secularist officials. To many Turks, this issue typifies a broader debate over the identity of their country.

The next important piece of the domestic political puzzle in Turkey is to understand the dynamic between the government and the military establishment. Traditionally, the military plays the role of protector of the secular republic. This history can be traced back to 1826 when Sultan Mahmud II ordered the execution of 40,000 religious Janissary forces, replacing them with a modern military institution in the image of European armies and under tight control of the administration. Additionally, the tradition of Kemal Ataturk's leadership still forms the backbone of the military's fervently secular identity. Briefly, Ataturk was an army officer who fought

in WWII and then rallied Turkish forces to stave off British and French territorial ambitions. After seizing control of the country, Ataturk looked westward to institute a litany of modernization reforms, with the separation of religion and government being a major ideological pillar. Today, as the secular identity of the country continues to wane, the military establishment remains a bastion of secularism. When AK Parti leader Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan appointed Aptullah Gul, an openly Islamist candidate, for president earlier this year, the military threatened to seize control of the government. Furthermore, as a check (or challenge) to Erdogan's control of the country, the military has increased its vigilance in dismissing officers for what they call "pro-Islamist activities." Turkey must reconcile the differences between parliament and the military in order to stave off an impending storm on its political horizon.

Conclusion:

Turkey connects civilizations with significant international influence, and it should use this asset more to its advantage. As the country of the "Gateway City," it should recognize that it could provide a middle ground for conflict. This, however, requires continued economic growth and diversification. Turkey should use its burgeoning economic relations as a starting point between the many countries it interacts with. One glaring example of this is the growing hostilities between Israel and Iran. Turkey should take advantage of strong economic relations with both countries to suggest talks between the two powerful and rancorous nations. To become a major player in international relations means taking the initiative on important issues, and if Turkey is looking for acceptance, especially from the Western world, the Israeli-Iranian issue is a good place to start.

By realizing that it is on the fault line of two major civilizations, Turkey will be a powerful country when it can utilize the first two links of economics and geopolitics. However, the connection for these two links rests in the resolution of Turkey's identity crisis. Turks are proud of two heritages: their powerful Ottoman roots and their secular nationalism under Ataturk. Bringing these two heritages -one Islamic and one proWestern secularist - together to work for the common goals of the country is a difficult task; the two can't even share the same soccer team!¹ Understanding that this demand is a tall order, I maintain that difficult compromises will occur, and once they do, Turkey will be a force in international relations.

This summer was a unique and invaluable experience for my continued studies of the Middle East, and I would like to offer my sincerest thanks to the Franklin Center/Clinger Study Abroad Fellowship for giving me this amazing opportunity.

¹ *Fenerbahçe* fans root for the Turkish Republic and *Galatasaray* fans trace their pride back to the Ottoman Empire.