

# **CONFLICTING VOICES: A STUDY OF YOUTH PERSPECTIVES ON CONTEMPORARY TURKISH POLITICS**

*Turkey is an important country in a state of political and social transition, with a very young population. The direction Turkey will take will be determined by Turkish youth. The following is an analysis of the political issues valued most by Turkish university students based on original field research. This paper will attempt to answer the following questions: What political issues are important to Turkish university students? What ideological conflicts divide Turkish youth, and what solutions do they offer to bridge these contradicting opinions?*

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While most countries in Europe are faced with declining youth populations, Turkey's is burgeoning –by 2025 it will surpass Germany as the second most populous country in Europe.<sup>1</sup> Turkey is geographically and culturally wedged between Europe and Asia, and its politics have substantial effects beyond its borders. In this context young Turks are extremely important because amongst themselves, they hold radically different opinions on many critical issues including; the role of religion in society, recognition of the Kurds, Turkey's possible EU accession, and how the country should handle political conflicts involving its neighbors. Despite these internal divisions, young people in Turkey find consensus on the issues of combating unemployment and corruption in the country. Turkey could go in a myriad directions, and the future of the country is in the hands of its youth.

### ***Finding the Political Pulse of Turkish Youth***

To gauge the political pulse of Turkey's youth, my research went directly to the future leaders of the country; Turkish university students. Through a series of interviews, questionnaires and participant observation, I asked Turkish university students what political issues they felt were most important, where they stood on these issues in relation to others, and what solutions they offer to reach a consensus over these concerns.

Aside from comprehensive interviews in both English and in Turkish, Over 443 questionnaires were collected from university students, ages 18-23 during a seven month period. The questionnaire was anonymous allowing individuals the freedom to answer questions without fear of immediate judgment and was translated into Turkish in order to reach a greater number of students. These questionnaires were distributed to university students in Ankara, Antalya, Konya, Istanbul, Izmir, Trabzon and Van, and usually participants were found in public places like cafeterias and other student gathering areas.

These cities were chosen to represent the diverse populations in distinct geographic areas that had at least one major university. Unfortunately, the South and South-Eastern regions of the country are underrepresented. It should be noted that the students interviewed represent only the Turkish youth who are able to attend university. In 2004 only 20 percent of the 1.8 million students who took the University Entrance Exam found a place in one of Turkey's universities.<sup>2</sup> While Turkey is investing heavily in education, it is doubtful that they will be able to efficiently accommodate the five million students

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<sup>1</sup> Population Reference Bureau, <http://www.prb.org/datafind/datafinder7.htm>, 10 November 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Baris Tan, "Management Education in Turkey: A Global Guide to Management Education 2006" *Global Foundation for Management Education* [http://www.gfme.org/global\\_guide/pdf/251-256%20Turkey.pdf](http://www.gfme.org/global_guide/pdf/251-256%20Turkey.pdf), 2006

expected to take the exam in 2010.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, with the exception of very few cases, those who wear the headscarf are also not represented because of the restrictions on the headscarf in Turkish universities.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, some students felt uncomfortable airing their “dirty laundry” with a foreign woman; on the other hand others claimed that they would not have been so open in their interviews and questionnaires if it were for a “normal Turk.”

### ***The Most Important Issue in Contemporary Turkish Politics***

This particular research project materialized while compiling information for a larger study on the importance of women’s issues for Turkish youth in comparison to other political issues. Included in the interviews and questionnaires is the following open-ended question; “What is currently the most important issue in Turkish politics?” The answers to this particular question became the center of this research study. The question is revealing because students were forced to come up with their own, creative answers to this question since none were suggested. Answering this question took extra initiative and was left blank by one-third of the participants: However, those who did answer often wrote down more than one issue and punctuated their responses with exclamation points, underlines and capitalization to show their enthusiasm.

The answers to the question were surprising: While the question was framed in the paradigm of women’s issues, they remained conspicuously absent. Instead students wrote in order of concern that the most important issues for them were the Kurdish issue, Turkey’s membership into the European Union, the role of religion in Turkish society and politics, unemployment, Turkey’s relations with its neighbors and corruption in government. Following Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, the survey participants felt that their personal safety, sufficient economic opportunities, and political stability, had to be met before discussing specific women’s issues.

### ***Kurdish Issue: The Politics of Identity and Fear***

When I asked Turkish university students to reveal what they think is the most important political issue of the day, 137 students, an impressive 46 percent claimed that they were most concerned with the “Kurdish Issue” and the “PKK.” One in five Turks are of Kurdish descent<sup>5</sup>, and while the survey participants were not explicitly asked to reveal their ethnicity<sup>6</sup>, roughly 20 percent listed that they spoke a Kurdish language at home, thus showing their Kurdish origins<sup>7</sup>. Of this group, 82 percent wrote that Kurdish issues

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<sup>3</sup>Of the 1.8 million students who took the University Entrance Examination only 391,759 found places in Turkey’s elite universities. This statistic also came from Baris Tan’s *Management Education in Turkey: A Global Guide to Management Education 2006*.

<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, the number of headscarf-wearing women who would go to university if not for restrictions on the headscarf is unknown.

<sup>5</sup>The CIA, “Turkey,” *The CIA World Factbook*, <https://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/tu.html>, 11 November 2006

<sup>6</sup> Since the idea of “ethnicity” can be problematic in Turkey, language was used to infer different ethnicities.

<sup>7</sup> 443 survey participants, 67 said that they spoke Kürtce, Zaza or Kurmanci, all Kurdish languages, at home. Of this group 11 participants did not list anything under “The most important issue in contemporary

were the most important issues in Turkish politics. The largest percentage of students who spoke Kurdish at home came from Van, a city in Eastern Turkey.<sup>8</sup>

According to Ottoman logic and the Turkish officialdom, minorities are not based upon ethnicity but on religion, and since the Kurds are primarily Muslims, they are not treated as a minority ethnic group. This ideology is butting heads with both European Union guidelines that support ethnic minorities and with many self-identified Kurds who are fighting for more cultural and political autonomy. While many Kurds feel that these rights can be achieved by working with the Turkish Government, others advocate the creation of an independent Kurdistan. The results of the efforts of those who want cultural and political autonomy, those who support the territorial integrity of Turkey and those who have exploited this situation, is 20 years of violent clashes between the two groups killing tens of thousands in the process.

The paramount concern of many of survey participants who spoke Kurdish at home is to be recognized as a “Kurd.” While the majority of individuals of Kurdish descent are completely assimilated into Turkish culture, in Van I talked with a few dozen students who professed that they don’t want to be “dismissed” as “Mountain Turks.” They want recognition as a different ethnic group, with a right to celebrate their distinct culture. Until 1991, Turkey banned the use of the Kurdish language, and while rules have recently relaxed allowing some private school instruction and a few television broadcasts, many Kurds feel that they are still not able to use their language freely, without fear of reprobation.

Some of these students support violence by claiming that it is “self-defense” against the Turkish authorities and view the PKK as “freedom fighters.” According to one student in Konya who is a Kurdish activist and teaches Kurdish classes, the conflict is “in (his) blood,” and that he would “never stop fighting until (the Kurds) are free.” While the vast majority of the students interviewed who supported Kurdish separatism<sup>9</sup> did not explicitly condone the use of violence, many did not condemn it. In the questionnaires a few students wrote quotations in support of PKK founder Abdullah Öcalan who is currently serving a lifetime sentence for being responsible for more than 30,000 deaths<sup>10</sup> since 1984 and is recognized in most countries as a terrorist. Actions by Kurdish fighters and the Turkish state have both been officially condemned by human rights organizations like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. The waves of bombings all over Turkey targeting civilians, tourists and military personnel have made most Turkish youth nervous about their personal safety. They don’t see the PKK as “freedom fighters” but as “terrorists.”

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Turkish politics” and of the remaining 56 individuals, 46 claimed that the “Kurdish Issue” and the “PKK” were the most important issues in Turkish politics.

<sup>8</sup> Of the 67 students who spoke Kurdish at home, 35 were from the city of Van in Eastern Turkey.

<sup>9</sup> In Van over one-half of the students who spoke Kurdish at home, openly support Kurdish separatism. In other areas, less than one-third of Kurdish speakers surveyed supported separatism.

<sup>10</sup> “Bettina Luscher, Tom Mintier, and Matthew Chance, “The Öcalan Trial,” *CNN.com*, <http://www.cnn.com/WORLD/meast/9906/29/ocalan.reax.01/>, 29 June 1999.

The idea of Kurdish nationalism is also terrifying for most Turks as it is seen as a real threat to Turkey's territorial integrity and to Atatürk's vision that Turks are based on Turkish citizenship, regardless of where one is originally from. One of the most important sayings in Turkey is, "Ne Mutlu Türküm Diyene" which translates to, "Happy is whoever says, 'I am a Turk.'" In Konya I witnessed one student react to this phrase by saying, "but I'm a Kurd!" The idea that individuals live within Turkey's borders who do not wish to be Turkish is often taken as a personal offense and this particular incident sparked a quick and violent reaction from a large group of students within earshot. Although this particular incident ended peacefully, this episode is indicative of high tensions and similar conflicts throughout the country.

### ***The European Union***

In October 2005 Turkey finally began accession talks with the European Union, 19 years after applying for full membership. Despite Turkey's long relationship with the European Union, Turkey has only recently begun seriously pursuing the dream of EU accession. During the last two administrations Turkey has demonstrated its commitment to Europe by making some of the most dramatic political, economic and social reforms since the founding of the republic, leading to Turkey's successful fulfillment of the political and social standards outlined by the Copenhagen Criteria. Despite these positive advancements, the popularity of the European Union has diminished dramatically in response to the constant, public, anti-Turkish debate in the European press, and the relative-absence of a strong counter-effort by Turkish leaders and the Turkish media to put European statements into perspective. The lack of a consensus from Turkish youth regarding this issue truly reflects the different ways Turks view their own future.

Despite divisions, 79 students stated that the European Union is the most important issue in Turkey, placing it right below the Kurdish issue. In regards to the European Union Turkish students are divided into four ideological camps; one group believes that Turkey should continue to do whatever possible to attain EU membership status; the second, and largest group, is pro- European Union but thinks that Turkey has to put limits on what concessions it is willing to make; the third and fourth groups think that Turkey should not continue to pursue Europe because it should either be completely self sufficient, or because Turkey should make an effort to ally themselves more closely with other Muslim nations.

In general, most individuals in Turkey still support the European Union despite a recent decrease in popularity. Of the total survey participants, twice as many students favored Turkey's membership to the European Union than those who did not<sup>11</sup>. Similarly, in a recent MetroPoll survey, 54.6 percent of university students said that they would support a Turkish referendum to join the European Union in contrast to the 34.5 percent who oppose Turkish membership.<sup>12</sup> It is my opinion that the majority of students surveyed

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<sup>11</sup> 268 supported Turkey's entrance into the European Union and 125 were against accession

<sup>12</sup> "Youth Back EU Bid but Have No Faith, Poll Says," *Turkish Daily News*  
<http://www.turkishdailynews.com.tr/article.php?newsid=62406,24> December 2006.

support the idea of European Union membership but place caveats on what they think Turkey should do for membership.

The students who fully support European Union membership often view accession as the final, natural, step towards Ataturk's process of modernization. For many of these supporters, it is a type of "magic bullet" that would guarantee political, religious and cultural freedom to all within Turkey, increase women's rights and firmly anchor Turkey to the West, curbing the popularity of Islamic extremism. Generally in Turkey, the EU is viewed as a potential playground ripe with educational and employment opportunities accessible to Turkey once it obtains membership and others feel that the EU would increase Turkey's legitimacy in the world providing Turkey with much-needed political and economic stability, bringing more investment opportunities to the country.

If Turkey joined the European Union, the benefits would be great, but floating in the Turkish press and around university campus is the idea that the EU is not worth the threat to Turkish sovereignty. Many of the Turks interviewed, especially those in Istanbul, Konya and Ankara, point to the dramatic concessions Turkey has already made and comment that it has done little to "satisfy" Europe. Turkish officials and the decision makers in EU institutions have very different agendas in regards to Northern Cyprus, the rights of the Kurds, the existence of the controversial Article 301 which makes it a crime to "denigrate Turkishness," the recognition of the disputed Armenian genocide and the role of the military as the guardians of secularism. It is unlikely that the Turkish government and many Turks will reverse policy on these issues without a fight,<sup>13</sup> and when this time comes Turks will have to choose between issues of nationalism and the European Union.

There is also a fear that by trying so hard to be European, Turkey is losing its own cultural identity. According to one student in Trabzon who considers herself a strong "supporter of Ataturk and his reforms," "Turkey is in chaos" and "there is a corruption in society because we try too much to be like (the) West." This quotation gives insight into a large number of students who feel that by focusing outwards, Turkey is slowly destroying its traditions and morality.<sup>14</sup>

In the last two years support for the European Union has dropped dramatically from 85 percent in 2004 to less than 50 percent today.<sup>15</sup> This drop could be explained by the failure of member states to ratify a constitution and the difficulty in absorbing the new member states, which make Turkish accession even more unpopular in Europe, thus more unlikely. The growing unpopularity of the EU in Turkey also correlates to the number of students who believe that despite its best efforts, Turkey will not become a full EU member. Recently, 61.5 percent of students said that Turkey will never be able to join the

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<sup>13</sup> This is the opinion of the author.

<sup>14</sup> 32.2 percent of the MetroPoLL survey participants listed "a weakening of national values" as the worst drawback to joining the European Union according to the article, *Youth Back EU Bid but Have No Faith, Poll Says*.

<sup>15</sup> "Turkey, America and Europe: The Awkward Partners" *The Economist*, [http://www.economist.com/world/europe/displaystory.cfm?story\\_id=7971046](http://www.economist.com/world/europe/displaystory.cfm?story_id=7971046), 26 September 2006

European Union citing problems over Turkey's size, economy, religion and stalled negotiations over Cyprus.<sup>16</sup>

While the majority of Turkish students in this research study support the European Union, one-third think that Turkey should abandon the European project and perhaps look to other allies in the region. In the interviews, students repeatedly claimed that while Turkey is "completely self-sufficient," Europe is "old" and needs Turkey's young population to support their industries and feed its military. To a lesser extent, students also pointed specifically to Turkey's role in the affairs of the Caucasus and the oil-producing Middle East and Central Asian Republics for other reasons why Europe needs Turkey, but Turkey does not need Europe. Using this logic, a large number of Turks have pointed to failures in Europe to show that Turkey needs to reach out more to its Muslim neighbors in the Middle East and play a more active role in Central Asia.<sup>17</sup>

### ***Religion, Politics and Headscarves***

The third most important issue for Turkish university students is the debate over the role of religion in Turkish society and politics. Over 20 percent of Turkish students surveyed listed religious issues as the most important issues in Turkey today, including freedom of religious expression, the nature of Turkish secularism and the restrictions on placed on the headscarf in university students, members of Parliament and civil servants.

In the questionnaires, 10 individuals wrote that the most important issue in Turkish politics is religious freedom which affects both religious minorities and Muslims alike. Despite a strong history of religious pluralism, currently only .2 percent of Turkey's total population is non-Muslims, primarily Christian and Jewish. Of the survey participants however, the only non-Muslims were eight Zoroastrians who claimed that their ID cards said "Muslim" because Zoroastrianism is not one of the state-designated religions.

Although Turkey is 99.8 percent Muslim, hidden within this statistic is a plethora of Sufi sects that have been either banned or otherwise discriminated against since the founding of the republic. Most Turks follow the Hanefi school of Sunni Islam but differ greatly in their interpretation of the Qur'an, how it should be practiced, and their support for Turkish secularism. While traditional "secularism" is defined by the separation of religion and the state, "Turkish secularism" or "laicism" places religion under the control of the state.

The power that the Turkish Ministry of Religious Affairs has to decide when and where mosques will be built, pays the salaries of Imams and can regulate content of the Friday prayers is upsetting to the students surveyed who would like to see more freedom of religion. One headscarf-wearing student who represents a growing number of educated, Islamist girls claimed that in Turkey, "we don't have religion but Statism."

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<sup>16</sup> Youth Back EU Bid but Have No Faith, Poll Says

<sup>17</sup> According the December 2006 MetroPOLL survey, 27.4 percent of students felt that Turkey should ally itself with the EU in regards to it's long-term national interest, but 27.7 and 16.1 percent felt that Turkey should instead focus on the Central Asian Republics and The Middle East, respectively.

The tension between Islamism and secularism is manifested in the debate over the headscarf and if it should be restricted for members of Parliament, university students, and civil servants. This issue is interesting because it is so divisive: When asked if the headscarf should be allowed in universities the population was split in half and evenly divided by gender.<sup>18</sup>

Despite the tremendous obstacles to being a covered woman in a public university, I surveyed and interviewed 15 students who are currently covered and three who previously wore the headscarf but decided not to wear it in the last two years. While women wear the headscarf for a variety of socio-political reasons, all of the students said that they wear the scarf primarily because it is a necessary dictate of the Qur'an. Some wear the scarf despite extreme opposition from their parents and most maintain that while they are "faithful Muslims" they were also "Turks" and "lovers of Atatürk". One frustrated student protested, "I don't understand, aren't we all Muslims?" stating that there should be no limitations on the headscarf in a country of what she called, "true believers."

These motivated girls and their counterparts avoid university restrictions by wearing hats, wigs, hooded sweatshirts or removing their headscarf right before class. In more liberal schools some girls are still able to wear the headscarf but must constantly navigate around certain guards, professors and administrators. I witnessed this phenomenon first-hand when I was forbidden from bringing my covered interviewees into the public area of one of the dormitories in Istanbul because of restrictions on the headscarf. To avoid this hassle, Prime Minister Erdogan's own daughters are educated in the United States. Even after getting a university education, many girls find that their job prospects are limited if they continue to wear the headscarf. Of the survey participants, only 85 students felt that there were enough employment opportunities available for covered women while 236 disagreed.

While half of the students surveyed supported the headscarf in universities, the other half of the survey participants believes that the headscarf represents a legitimate threat to Turkish secularism. Of the 25 students who listed the headscarf issue as the most important in Turkey, the vast majority are female and believe that the headscarf should not be allowed in universities.<sup>19</sup>

For these students, the headscarf represents a type of political Islam that will curb individual freedoms if it is allowed to grow. They state that if the ban is lifted, soon everyone will be forced to cover. One student in Trabzon reinforced this point by stating that "it is more important to protect the right not to wear (the headscarf) than to wear

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<sup>18</sup> Of the total sample of survey participants 201 students agreed with the claim that "the headscarf should be allowed in universities" while 195 did not. Gender had no impact on this statistic: For example, 105 women supported the headscarf compared to 92 men, an even ratio when considering that more women answered the questionnaire than men.

<sup>19</sup> Of this sample, 20 were female and 5 male. Six supported the headscarf, three had no opinion and 16 did not.

one.” Most supporters of Turkish secularism point to Turkey’s neighbor Iran as an example of how women began to cover and brought to power an extremist movement that later put restrictions on women’s rights and individual freedoms.

In 1998 The European Court of Human Rights echoed a similar sentiment when it ruled against Leyla Sahin’s right to wear the headscarf at Istanbul University asserting that, “The court did not lose sight of the fact that there were extremist political movements in Turkey which sought to impose on society as a whole their religious symbols and conception of a society founded on religious precepts.”<sup>20</sup> The fear of religious fundamentalism came up many times in my surveys and interviews. It seems that this fear of fundamentalism increased was magnified after 2003 with the large-scale terrorist attacks in Istanbul where the HSBC Bank, two Jewish synagogues and the British Embassy were bombed within a week leaving 50 dead. Most surprising is that those responsible for these attacks were not foreign extremists but Turks committing violence against other Turks. Two years after the attacks, the Pew Global Attitudes Project found that extremism still exists with seven percent of Turks confident in Osama Bin Laden as a world leader and 14 percent supporting the claim that violence is acceptable against civilians in defense of Islam.<sup>21</sup>

One of the biggest fears of secular Turks is the incredible political activity of young covered women. They campaigned heavily for the now-banned Refah Party; Merve Kavakçı tried to enter Parliament with her headscarf; women played an important role in AKP coming to power in the last national elections. Many of the more liberal and Islamist-oriented students surveyed expressed contentment with the current government’s efforts which are seen as “Pro-Western” yet “Islamic”, materializing in a stable economy, continued talks with the EU, and “more freedom and diversity” in government.

Other students vehemently disagree with the direction of the AKP. One student from Konya wrote on her survey that “the AKP government (is trying) to slowly undermine the concepts of Laicism and Republicanism.” Secular-oriented students worry that the current administration is part of a dangerous trend of manipulating religion to fit their political agenda. For example, for one student from Konya who opposes the headscarf in universities, the most important issue in Turkey is “the fact that religion is used for propaganda purposes” causing “difficult social conditions” for “laic thought and its defenders.” In 2007 there will be new elections and in general, many are worried that the popularity of the AKP will continue and that current Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan could replace the very secular Ahmet Sezer as President, a move that would give him the authority to veto laws and set the country’s political agenda. Some speculate that if this scenario plays out, the relatively-quiet military might intervene in the form of another coup, something that could harm the political and economic stability of the country and hurt Turkey’s EU accession talks.

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<sup>20</sup> “Court backs Turkish headscarf ban” *BBC News*, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4424776.stm>, 10 November 2005

<sup>21</sup> “Pew Global Attitudes Project,” *Pew Research Center*, <http://pewglobal.org/reports/display.php?PageID=814>, 14 July 2005

### ***Unemployment and The Turkish Economy***

Among the many divisive political issues in Turkish society, almost all of the students interviewed agreed on the importance of keeping the Turkish economy stable and reducing the number of Turkey's underemployed and unemployed. Of the issues written as most important to Turkish youth, unemployment was ranked fourth and the "Turkish Economy" was ranked sixth, respondents from all cities and economic groups mentioning it 48 times in total. The problem is substantial with an estimated 10.2 percent of Turkey's population unemployed and four percent underemployed in 2005.<sup>22</sup> On the surface the figure looks relatively benign, until realizing that the total amount is 10 million people, more than all of Austria.<sup>23</sup>

Unemployment is related to a country's economic health and while confidence in Turkey's economy is currently strong, the country is still recovering from the shock of its last economic crisis in 2001 when the lira fell 50 percent against the dollar, per capita GNP fell 9.6 percent and hundreds of thousands of Turks lost their jobs.<sup>24</sup> This uncertainty in the future economy was felt last summer when the government devalued the lira leading to noticeable inflation in Istanbul and complaints around the city. The Turkish economy has remained relatively stable despite the conflict in Iraq, increased PKK activity, and reactions to EU-inspired reforms. In general it is believed that this stability is partially caused by continued talks with the European Union; one business student in Istanbul likened the EU to a "psychological safety net" and a "guarantor" for Turkey, claiming that the mere idea that Turkey will some day be part of Europe is enough to bring foreign investors into the country. The big question remains –is Turkey strong enough to withstand the financial ramifications if EU talks are broken?<sup>25</sup>

### ***A Rough Neighborhood: Turkey's International Relations***

There is no question that Turkey is in a rough neighborhood, making relations with surrounding countries complicated and difficult. Almost 15 percent of young Turks from all cities surveyed wrote that Turkey's international relations is the most important contemporary political issue: Five individuals mentioned foreign policy in general, 11 individuals wrote about Iraq, Iran and Syria; eight noted Armenia and 16 noted Cyprus. Relations with Greece were not mentioned. Turkish youth recognize the extreme importance of Turkey's relations with its neighbors and feel uneasy about the future because while they feel like they have little influence in their own government; events in other countries are out of their hands entirely. Most students surveyed believe that the countries that pose the biggest threat to Turkey's security are its Muslim neighbors; Iraq, Iran and Syria. While Turkey has its own problems with Iran regarding what one secular student called "radical Shi'a extremism" and with Syria over the Hatay and water rights

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<sup>22</sup> CIA World Factbook

<sup>23</sup> Population Reference Bureau

<sup>24</sup> "Turkey's Economy Shrinks" *BBC News*, [news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business/1518467.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business/1518467.stm), August 31, 2001

<sup>25</sup> The idea that the EU has substantially contributed to the stability of the Turkish economy was also mentioned on BBC News in 2005.

"Turkey Reforms Spurred by EU Dream" *BBC News* <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/business/4307644.stm> 4 October 2005

on the Euphrates, the biggest perceived threat is the high costs of an invasion into a neighboring country, like was the case with Iraq. The two Iraqi invasions have cost Turkey billions in lost trading revenues, tourist dollars, and resources spent controlling the border and refugee influxes. In almost half of the interviews, students blamed some form of “American Imperialism” and the 2002 invasion of Iraq for an increased presence of Islamic terrorists at its doorstep and for the recent increase in Kurdish violence.

While Turkey’s Muslim neighbors are perceived as possible security threats, Turkey’s relationship with Cyprus and Armenia are framed in terms of Turkey’s public-relations abroad and its candidacy for the European Union. One of Turkey’s biggest obstacles to EU accession is the fact that a divided Cyprus<sup>26</sup> recently became a voting member of the European Union. Despite extreme international pressure to the contrary Turkey still refuses to open its ports and airports to Greek Cyprus causing stalls in European Union negotiations.<sup>27</sup>

Similarly, some European politicians like French President Jaques Chirac have declared that Turkey can never join the European Union without first recognizing the deaths of the many Armenians killed in 1915 as “genocide,”<sup>28</sup> something Turkish officials have refused to do. The Turkish Government has gone one step further, threatening prosecution for individuals who confirm the existence of the genocide such as Nobel-Prize winning author Orhan Pamuk.<sup>29</sup> The same day that Pamuk received his Nobel Prize, the French National Assembly criminalized the denial of the Armenian genocide inside France, creating an international public-relations nightmare for Turkey. When this issue was brought up in interviews the majority of students expressed unhappiness that they are being punished for past events that they feel have no connection to modern Turkey or to them. In these interviews most pointed to the past saying that while many Armenians were killed, so were Turks and that even if a genocide did occur the Ottomans would be to blame, not modern Turks.

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<sup>26</sup> Cyprus has been a divided country since 1974. The northern third of the island is primarily Turkish and is recognized by Turkey as the separate “Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus.” The southern two-thirds of the island is primarily Greek and is an EU member.

<sup>27</sup> “Turkey Vows More EU Reforms,” *Reuters.com.uk*, [http://today.reuters.co.uk/news/articlenews.aspx?type=worldNews&storyID=2007-01-10T104246Z\\_01\\_MOL038419\\_RTRUKOC\\_0\\_UK-TURKEY-EU-GUL.xml&WTmodLoc=HP-C3-World](http://today.reuters.co.uk/news/articlenews.aspx?type=worldNews&storyID=2007-01-10T104246Z_01_MOL038419_RTRUKOC_0_UK-TURKEY-EU-GUL.xml&WTmodLoc=HP-C3-World) 6, January 10, 2007

<sup>28</sup> “French in Armenia ‘Genocide’ Row,” *BBCNews.com*, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/6043730.stm>, October 12, 2006

<sup>29</sup> Pamuk is not the only one who was threatened with prosecution for talking about the Armenian genocide. Authors put in trial include Murat Belge, Hasan Cemal, Erol Katircioglu, Haluk Sahin, Hrant Dink and Murat Yetkin. Yetkin was facing a possible four-and-a-half year jail sentence for criticizing the Pamuk case in the newspaper, *Radikal*. Charges against Pamuk were dropped in January of 2006. “Turkey Debates Free Expression of Thought” *Turkish Daily News.com.tr* <http://www.turkishdailynews.com.tr/article.php?enewsid=55409>, October 1, 2006

### ***Corruption in Government***

In 2002 the Justice and Development Party (AKP) won an overwhelming majority in Parliament running on a Muslim-Democratic platform of stability, honesty, democracy, freedom and anti-corruption. These issues are still of paramount concern for many Turks who believe that they have seen little improvements in the last four years.<sup>30</sup> In total, 36 individuals wrote about domestic political issues and how they are unhappy with their government. Corruption was noted seven times, honesty two, stability four and problems with Turkish politics in general was listed nine times. When asked if the Turkish Government was corrupt, three-fourths<sup>31</sup> of all the survey participants agreed including those who generally support the AKP. Corruption is an issue of extreme importance for most Turks: When asked to rate the personal importance of corruption in government 91 percent of Turks claimed that it was important, 5 percent, or extremely important, 86 percent.

Along with corruption, students are disturbed by practices that they view as “undemocratic” including limitations on freedom of thought and expression, an issue which nine individuals wrote as the biggest problem in Turkish society. Of those nine comments almost all mention Turkey’s infamous Article 301 which makes it a crime to “denigrate Turkishness” punishable by imprisonment and its high profile violators, Orhan Pamuk and Elif Safak, as incarnations of the lack of freedom in Turkey and motivators for self-censorship in the country.

### ***Frustration, Fear of the Status Quo and Plans for Resolution***

When looking at all of the multi-faceted issues present, it is clear that Turkish youth have very distinct, competing narratives regarding the future of their country. While some embrace the challenge to change the direction of Turkey, others are apprehensive about perceived threats to their way of life. In their interviews, a majority of students expressed that they wanted more openness and freedom of thought and discussion. However, with this freedom comes with a host of different ideologies that some Turk’s don’t want to hear because it is too personal and the threat to their perceived way of life seems too imminent. Fear is a re-occurring theme polarizing the country into different groups, all intimidated by each other. This can be seen by the frequency of the word “hate” when discussing other ideologies in the form of “they hate our way of life” or “I hate those people who are trying to destroy our country.”

In this time of uncertainty, most of the young Turks included in this research crave stability and ownership in the future direction of their country. Fortunately, they are well prepared for the challenge raised in a country which has throughout history been a meeting place for diverse thoughts and opinions. When asked about possible solutions to these problems, they fit into three categories; increased communication, education and

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<sup>30</sup> The idea that the AKP ran on a platform of “clean government” but has done little to curb corruption was also echoed in the Economist magazine. “Country Briefings: Turkey” *The Economist*, <http://www.economist.com/countries/Turkey/profile.cfm?folder=Profile-Political%20Forces>, July 6, 2006

<sup>31</sup> Of the 420 students who answered the questions, 320 agreed that the Turkish Government is corrupt.

political participation.<sup>32</sup> One student from Izmir who is active in student government and local politics offered this advice; “The only way to curb extremism is through communication.” This sentiment was echoed by other students interviewed who expressed that individuals become radicalized when they feel marginalized and have no other political outlet. The Turkish Government is taking note and in March hosted the first of hopefully many comprehensive conferences to publicly discuss the Kurdish issue.<sup>33</sup> The successes of the Justice and Development Party and continued dialogue with the European Union have also stimulated vital dialogue regarding the role of religion in society and Turkey’s relationship with the European Union.

Along with increased civil dialogue many claim that Turkey’s young generations need to have better access to education at the university level and a space for intellectual debate in order to come to a consensus regarding the future of the country. Others advocate increased educational opportunities to learn about the Turkish political system, the intricacies of Turkey’s main political issues, the reasons behind different political opinions and how young people can get involved politically. While the students interviewed seemed to care deeply about Turkish politics, statistically Turkish youth have low levels of participation in politics and in civil society.<sup>34</sup> This does not mean that the voices of Turkish youth don’t matter, quite the contrary. With the help of active youth networks like GençNet of the ARI Movement, which promotes youth participation in politics around Turkey,<sup>35</sup> the Turkey’s youth are becoming increasingly vocal. In the last election the youth vote is often cited as the reason for the AKP victory and as Turkey’s young population continues to grow they will become increasingly more important as a voting block. With one in four Turks between the ages of 10 and 24<sup>36</sup> and half of the population under 25<sup>37</sup>, when Turkish youth speak, the country will have to listen.

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<sup>32</sup> All of these solutions were offered through interviews with Turkish students. Similar conclusions were made, in part or as a whole, by many contributors to the Spring 2006 edition of Turkish Policy Quarterly.

<sup>33</sup> The conference on the Kurdish issue was officially titled “Turkey’s Kurdish Question: The Quest for Democratic and Civilian Solutions”

Cengiz Candar “Mixed Signals From Kurdish Conference in Istanbul” *The New Anatolian*, [www.thenewanatolian.com/opinion-2726.html](http://www.thenewanatolian.com/opinion-2726.html), March 15, 2006

<sup>34</sup> For example, 70 percent of Turkish youth reject all activities related to political parties. Dr. Emre Erdogan, “The Turkish Youth and Political Participation,” *The International Republican Institute*, [http://www.urbanhobbit.net/PDF/typp\\_english.pdf](http://www.urbanhobbit.net/PDF/typp_english.pdf)

<sup>35</sup> [www.genchnet.org](http://www.genchnet.org)

<sup>36</sup> Population Reference Bureau

<sup>37</sup> Population Reference Bureau