

## MISUNDERSTANDING TURKEY

*The author of this paper points out the pragmatic nature of the Turkish public and state when it comes to domestic and regional priorities. The idea that Turkey is in search of an identity or that historical hostilities govern regional relations are some of the assumptions which Mango believes lead to a misunderstanding of Turkey. Analyzing historical and domestic developments in this light, the paper puts forth that Turkey's decisions are dictated primarily by the search for economic well being and stability, and that Turkey's prospect of beginning of membership negotiations with the EU and regional role need to be evaluated in this framework.*

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We are all, of course, woefully misunderstood. And the reason, we often claim, is that others are not interested in what we really want to do, but think rather of what they want to do to us. It is us-in-relation-with-them that interests them, not us-in-ourselves. This is as true of countries as it is of individuals. We're more interested in the impact of a foreign country on our interests, in other words in its foreign policy, than we are in the concerns of its people.

Books on Turkish foreign policy have proliferated of late after a long period of proper neglect. I say 'proper', because there was little to say: Turkish foreign policy was consistent, pragmatic in defence of the national interest, and averse to risk. But of late these simple truths have not deterred researchers from digging deeper in search of evidence for their theories. There are several reasons for this surge of interest: turbulence in the region in which Turkey is located, Turkey's growing integration in the global system, an integration which increases as the country moves closer to the European Union, and which, in turn, is speeding up change within Turkish society, Turkey's openness to researchers, freedom of debate inside Turkey, the popularity of the soft and dubious science of international relations, and the insatiable demand for subjects for doctoral dissertations. Foreign interest in Turkish foreign policy is reciprocated inside Turkey, as domestic and foreign commentators quote each other and feed each other's theorising. It used to be said that when Turkish friends met round a bottle of *raki*, their first thought was to solve the country's problems. Now they begin by deciding Turkey's role in the world. And yet, when on the eve of the parliamentary elections last November, people were asked to place their concerns in order of importance, foreign relations did not figure on the list. This, I would argue, is the result of one of the main achievements of Atatürk and his republic.

Before the international acceptance of the Turkish national state by the treaty of Lausanne in 1923, the main question which preoccupied Muslim Turks was "How can this state and this nation (meaning the Muslim community) be saved?" The question, which inevitably concerned the impact on Turkey of great power policies, was usually asked in despairing tones. Atatürk gave the answer "By your own exertions", and led his people to independent nationhood. As the old preoccupation was consigned to history, two new questions came to the fore. They were "How can the country we have won be defended?" and "How can our country be developed?"

The first of these questions obtruded in times of crisis – during the Second World War and the Cold War and also when terrorism threatened the Turkish state and society, as it did intermittently from the 70's onwards. The first duty of the state is, after all, to ensure security of life and property. That's why states exist. When it looked or when it could be argued that the Turkish republic was failing in this task, insecurity was high on the list of the preoccupations of Turkish citizens. But this happened only briefly and exceptionally, whereas the preoccupation with material wellbeing expressed in the question "How can our country be developed?" has been constant. Throughout the history of the republic, economic development has been at the centre of the political debate, and material wellbeing has been the core concern of individuals. In the pre-electoral poll to which I have referred, the top priority was given to unemployment, followed by the high cost of

living. Corruption came a poor third, a point overlooked by analysts who attribute the victory of the Justice and Development Party to disgust with the corruption associated with parties which had previously governed the country. Corruption, like the poor, is always with us, and I do not believe that Turkish voters, for all their desire to end abuses by their fellow-citizens, were naïve enough to believe that politicians of Justice and Development were less open to temptation than their predecessors in power. What they hoped was that the leaders of the new party would put some money into their pockets which, as they saw it, had been emptied by their predecessors.

Now, I would argue that this attitude of the Turkish public is rational and characteristic of developed societies, at least in their sane moments. In most European countries today, the pursuit of glory is relegated to football fields and – let us hope against hope – to cultural achievement. In continental Europe, what people want above all is to keep their jobs and have more employment opportunities; in Britain, where unemployment is low, they want better public services, better schools, hospitals, public transport and policing. The main concern in foreign affairs is the avoidance of trouble. The same is true of Turkey. So when foreign politicians or experts propose to Turkey parts to play in foreign fields, the first reaction is a shiver of apprehension. The apprehension is fed by historical memory. Atatürk personified the reaction against the Sultans' pursuit of imperial grandeur, and the adventurism of the Young Turks. One of his memorable and perceptive remarks was "Let us know our limitations". The corollary was that there was more than enough work to do at home to develop a country which was abysmally poor and whose skills did not match modern needs.

When Winston Churchill wanted Turkey to enter the war on the Allied side, the Turkish president İsmet İnönü delayed the decision until the Second World War was nearly over. After the war, Turkey's main concern was to defend itself against Soviet encroachment and, as usual, to develop its economy. When Britain tried to enlist Turkish help in keeping the Middle East safe for the West, Turkey manoeuvred itself instead into the North Atlantic Alliance. The Truman Doctrine, Marshall Aid and NATO met Turkey's twin concerns – defence and development. Turkey did give pleasure to Britain and to a lesser extent the United States by entering the Baghdad Pact, but the commitment was minimal and there was some, small but welcome, material compensation. All these foreign policy arrangements minimised defence costs and maximised resources which could be used to raise the standard of living of a rapidly rising population. But there was one harmful departure from Atatürk's practice – Turkey developed a dependence on Western, mainly American, aid. This aid was not the main source of funds financing development, but it was important both in itself and because Turks began to see the West, in general, and the United States, in particular, as the guarantor of last resort – not only of their defence, which was legitimate and inevitable, but also a guarantor against the mistakes made by their governments, or rather their propensity to gain popularity by overspending. The availability of Western credits, which did not come free and had to be repaid, allowed bad governance to continue far longer than it would otherwise have done. And as long as credit was not exhausted, factories, houses and roads could be built, a large lower middle-class could move into modest apartment houses, and a growing middle class could acquire motor cars and holiday homes. There are, of course, worse

ways of spending national resources, in the pursuit of glory abroad, for example, or in expansionism. This the Turkish electorate did not want and Turkish governments have avoided. Roles abroad were proposed and endlessly discussed: in the Middle East, in the Balkans, in the former Soviet Union. But the role abroad that most Turks were interested in was that of a worker, a trader or contractor. Being a model for the newly-independent Turkic republics or for the Muslim world in general was fine, as long as modelling paid. Of course, *noblesse oblige* – a little light peacekeeping was all right. So I would argue that to avoid misunderstanding one must begin by recognising that most Turks, like rational, sensible people everywhere, want to cultivate their own garden, and that they are constantly searching for resources to do it. Cultivating one's garden means, of course, primarily improving individual life chances. When opportunities at home are limited, then fortune must be sought abroad, if at all possible.

A recent survey on Turkish attitudes to membership of the European Union showed clearly that most Turks want it in the hope that this would enable them to work in Western Europe. My respected teacher, Professor Bernard Lewis, was recently reported as saying at the American Enterprise Institute that Turkey had to make a momentous choice between Europe and the United States. But why should it? The process of accession to the European Union is long and uncertain. Even if the European Council decides in December 2004 to fix a date for the beginning of membership negotiations, and these begin in 2005, no one expects formal membership before 2010 at the earliest.

Free circulation of labour in Europe, which is what most Turks want, would come after a transitional period thereafter, say in the year 2017 or 2020. The shape and state of Europe and the state of Turkey in five, let alone in fifteen years' time, is beyond the scope of intelligent speculation. In the meantime, the customs union between Turkey and the European Union allows quasi-total free trade. Foreign direct investment (FDI) in Turkey, which would speed up economic development, depends less on Turkey's membership of the European Union than on better domestic governance. In any case, FDI is not the only way to enlist foreign participation in development. Alliances between foreign companies and Turkish companies, which retain control, have provided the main channel for the transfer to Turkey of foreign technology and management skills. Harmonisation with European legislation and practices, as a preliminary to accession, should improve governance even if accession is not achieved. Far from making it more difficult for Turkey to work together with developed countries outside the European Union, it will make it easier. Apart from Turkey's adherence to the European common external tariff, which is already in force and which can be made fairly elastic with a little creative interpretation, no exclusive choices need to be made now. It is said that by sending peacekeeping troops to Iraq, Turkey would alienate the European Union or, at least, its powerful members, France and Germany. I do not believe that this is the case. Apart from the fact that Britain, a member of the EU, and Poland, soon to become a member, are contributing peacekeepers, the attitude of member states standing on the sidelines is more likely to be "Best of luck boys, rather you than us". This, of course, would not stop them from criticising Turkey if things went wrong.

Is the choice which Professor Bernard Lewis believes, or is said to believe, to be incumbent on Turkey, more profoundly a choice of identity? The Turkish identity is a topic beloved of commentators who have been arguing for some time now that there is a struggle for the Turkish soul, rather like the struggle for the Russian soul which ranged Westernisers against Slavophiles in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the case of Turkey, the choice is said to be between a Western or a Muslim Middle Eastern identity, and in the case of a Western identity, between a European and an Atlanticist one. But are the Turks really groping for an identity? All I can say is that in my own experience at least the Turks I know have more important things to worry about. They are perfectly certain of their identity as Turks, a clearly defined community of Muslim tradition, and they want to be accepted as such in the family of civilised nations, just as Atatürk had envisaged. It is true that identity politics do exist in Turkey, but they concern minorities: the minority of Kurdish nationalists, whose proportion can be gauged from the fact that some 7% of the electorate voted for DEHAP (the Democratic People's Party), which is the legal vehicle for Kurdish nationalism, and the minority of Islamic fundamentalists, whose numbers are estimated by researchers at below 10% of the population. For these people, identity is the key to wellbeing. But the overwhelming majority of the population takes its identity for granted.

In his foreword to a book I wrote in 1994 under the title *Turkey: The challenge of a new role*, my learned friend Professor Heath Lowry expressed his worry at – and I quote – “the growing tendency of an ever-increasing percentage of the electorate to reject the traditional political parties of the centre-right and centre-left in favour of extremist religious and ultra-nationalist alternatives of the radical right”. As an example of this tendency Professor Lowry cited the results of the 1994 local elections in which the Islamists, represented at that time by the Welfare Party (RP), won control of the cities of Istanbul and Ankara. But did the citizens of the populous poor suburbs of Istanbul who had earlier voted for the social-democrats suddenly take to religion? Or did they vote for the Islamists because the social-democrats had provided rotten city government? I think it was for the latter reason. Similarly, did the ultra-nationalist Nationalist Action Party become the second strongest party in parliament in the 1999 elections because voters suddenly embraced ethnic politics? Or was it because they rejoiced at the capture of the terrorist leader Abdullah Öcalan, who had spread the virus of ethnic politics in the country, and because they believed that the Nationalist Action Party, which was under new and seemingly more pragmatic management, would prevent future outbreaks of terrorism by providing effective government? The fact that the vote of the Nationalist Action Party collapsed in the 2002 elections suggests that the attraction of ethnic Turkish politics was transient. But, of course, most voters want a government that will put Turkey first.

This leads me to another area of misunderstanding. Commentators on the Iraq crisis point out that Turkey is disturbed at the prospect of an independent Kurdish state in northern Iraq. This is true. But commentators go wrong when they attribute Turkish misgivings to a historic hostility between Turks and Kurds. There is no such historic hostility. There is a history of Kurdish tribal resistance to central government, be it Ottoman from Istanbul or Persian from Tehran. There is a history of Kurdish chieftains seeking outside allies

against encroaching central government. There is also a history of rivalry between Kurdish tribes and of shifting accommodations between some tribes and central government. It is true that Kurdish society is losing its tribal structure as a result of the sedentarisation of nomads, of urbanisation and of migration. In the light of current claims and counter-claims it is important to remember that until modern times there were hardly any Kurdish towns. Diyarbakır was not a Kurdish town, but a town of Ottoman officials and Arabic-speaking townspeople where some Kurdish chieftains had town mansions. The settlement of Kurdish-speakers in Diyarbakır is a recent phenomenon. The same is true of towns like Mardin and Siirt in south-eastern Turkey and of Kirkuk in Iraq. As for migration, it has certainly been spurred by terrorism and anti-terrorist operations (a phenomenon observable elsewhere, as, for example in Peru). It is also true that there has been some resettlement of Kurds both in Ottoman and in Turkish republican times away from the traditional Kurdish areas. But the main reason for migration is economic. It is not true that Turkey has exploited Kurdish areas, The Turkish treasury has consistently spent more money there than it has received in revenue, even if one excludes expenditure on law and order. These areas are harsh and geographically disadvantaged. To use a colourful Russian expression, these are places where a good master would not walk his dog. Given half a chance, local people go to climatically softer, economically more developed and geographically more accessible areas. There is a parallel here with the Armenians whose movement away from their upland home has been going on for centuries – from Byzantine through Ottoman times – a movement propelled by pull as much as by push. After the Ottoman Tanzimat reforms in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, at a time when there was little inter-communal friction between Turks and Armenians, the latter moved out in their thousands to settle in the commercial centres of Istanbul, Izmir, Trabzon and elsewhere. The same is true of Kurds in Turkey today. Most Kurds who make money move west, so too do enterprising Kurds who want a better life. In neighbouring Iraq, one is often told that the de facto autonomous Kurdish region in the north is a democratic haven of reasonably good order. Yet illegal emigrants from this self-governing area are forcing the gates of member countries of the European Union. But to return to Turkey, it is sometimes said that half the citizens of Kurdish origin now live outside their original homeland. I rather doubt it, but there is no gainsaying the fact that millions of Kurds live in predominantly ethnic Turkish areas. Now it is a remarkable, but little-noticed fact, that throughout the campaign which Turkish security forces have been waging to defeat the insurgency of Kurdish separatists, there has been no ethnic polarisation in Turkey. True, in Istanbul, Izmir, Trabzon and elsewhere one hears local people complain that “Easterners”, meaning Kurds, are spoiling their towns. But this is reminiscent of the attitude of Londoners or Glaswegians to poor Irish immigrants in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and of anti-immigrant resentment everywhere. However, in Turkey, except for rare instances, this resentment has not spilled into open clashes. The spread of Kurdish nationalism has not stopped the organic assimilation of Kurds in Turkish society nor the prevalence of inter-ethnic marriages. But it is a delicate process. Kurdish nationalism presents Turkey with its most difficult political problem, which must be handled with great care.

A perceptive British historian, Noel Malcolm, has been arguing for years that the mayhem in former Yugoslavia resulted not from historic ethnic hatreds but from the machinations of politicians. I agree with him and I think that his observation holds

lessons for Turkey too. This is where developments in northern Iraq pose a grave threat to Turkey. That area has seen ethnic cleansing, first of Kurds by Saddam Hussein and then of Arabs by the leaders of Kurdish political parties. Turkey is, in my view, justified to do all in its power to prevent the manufacture of “historic” ethnic hatred between Kurds and Turks in the schools and the media of Iraqi Kurdistan. In Turkey too, the danger that inter-ethnic hatred might be instigated where it does not exist, is one of the obstacles to the recognition of Kurdish cultural rights. What message will teachers of Kurdish convey to their pupils and Kurdish-language media convey to their audience? In Britain public order is not disturbed when Welsh and Scottish schoolchildren are told tales of English oppression. In Ireland, on the other hand, nationalist teachers wrought havoc. Turkey has to guard against such a danger. This does not mean that Kurdish-language teaching and broadcasting should be banned. They have, in any case, been permitted under the latest constitutional amendments. But developments in Iraq cannot be allowed to endanger peaceful change in Turkey. If properly handled, on the other hand, if the restructuring of Iraq leads to the establishment not necessarily of a democratic government – which may be a pipedream – but, at least, of a rational government which would use that country’s considerable resources for the good of its people, then Turkey, in general, and south-eastern Turkey, in particular, would reap great benefits.

“Peace at home and peace in the world” is one of Atatürk’s best-known sayings. These words do not convey a vague do-gooder aspiration. They are rather a commitment to the maintenance of civilised order, security and legality at home, and, as far as it is in Turkey’s power, and in conjunction with other civilised countries, outside Turkey’s borders too. Turkey was perfectly content when between the two world wars Britain and France kept order in the Middle East as mandatory powers. Their failure, and that of the West in general, to ensure good order after their departure from the area – that is what disturbed Turkey. It is not Western imperialism, but the incoherence of Western policy in the Middle East which endangers Turkey. In Cyprus too, Turkey was content as long as Britain governed the island and kept order there. It is Britain’s departure and its subsequent unwillingness to exercise its rights under the treaty guaranteeing the constitution devised for the island in 1960 that forced Turkey to intervene. Cyprus is yet another topic to which Turkish attitudes are widely misunderstood.

In December parliamentary elections will be held in Turkish northern Cyprus. The United States special representative has been reported to have expressed his support for the political opponents of Rauf Denktaş, the democratically elected president of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, a state which Turkey alone recognises. Denktaş is routinely portrayed in the West as an obstacle to the settlement of the Cyprus dispute. Last March he refused to submit to a referendum a settlement plan drawn up under the auspices of the UN secretary general Kofi Annan. The Greek Cypriot president of the internationally recognised Republic of Cyprus has been more guarded, although he too wishes to amend the plan – amend it out of existence, if at all possible. The European Union and the United States have repeatedly expressed the hope that Turkey would facilitate a Cyprus settlement. More concretely, they are asking Turkey not to support Denktaş’s friends in the forthcoming parliamentary elections, while they support Denktaş’s enemies. They hope that if Denktaş’s political opponents win and remove

him, as they have promised, from the post of negotiator with the Greek Cypriots, the Cyprus problem would be settled on the basis of the Annan plan and the whole island, rather than just the Greek two-thirds of it, would become a member of the European Union in May next year. It is often argued in the West that while the Turkish government would go along with this, what is termed the Turkish “establishment” or alternatively the “Kemalist establishment”, and above all the military, are determined to hold on to northern Cyprus. The advice to abandon Denktash, which rains on Turkey from all sides, is based on the premise that the Annan plan would settle the Cyprus problem. But would it?

The plan seeks not just to re-unite the island but to re-create by gradual degrees a mixed pattern of settlement, a pattern which was destroyed when the Turkish Cypriots came under attack in December 1963. It also recognises all property rights which were valid before the partition of the island. I am not sure whether this would take us back to 1963 or to 1974 when Turkish troops landed on the island in the wake of an attempted take-over by the junta which at the time held sway in Athens. In either case the plan would roll back or at least revise developments which have taken place on the ground over the last thirty or forty years. Can the aim be achieved and would it bring an improvement in conditions on an island which has been at peace since 1974, even if it is a peace that leaves many of its inhabitants dissatisfied?

I can think of no case where a multi-ethnic community, whose components have separated geographically as a result of inter-communal conflict, has been re-created. No one is proposing seriously to move the Germans back to Sudetenland in the Czech Republic or to western Poland, or to undo the two-way migration of Muslims and Hindus which occurred when British India was partitioned, or again to resettle Armenians in Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan, and Azeris in the Armenian republic. The current attempt to re-create the pre-war mixed pattern of settlement in Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo is making little headway in spite of Western pressure and the presence of Western troops to promote it. Can such an attempt succeed in Cyprus and would it bring a lasting settlement acceptable to both sides? It can be argued that when the Turkish Cypriots opened the border, the exchange of visitors between the two communities did not cause any trouble. But the visitors did not challenge the authority of the two governments on the island or try to enforce their property claims. It could also be argued that if the majority of Cypriot Turks accept the Annan plan, they should be allowed to put it into practice. But the majority of Israelis and of Palestinians accepted the Oslo accords at least until these were seen to result in greater insecurity and much greater bloodshed than before they had been signed. Bitter experience in Israel/Palestine should make us ask ourselves whether Denktash is an obstacle to a settlement or an obstacle to an agreement which would make an unsatisfactory but peaceful position worse than it is now.

Turkey wants a Cyprus settlement. It needs it much more than do the countries which are making a determined pitch for the Annan plan. The plan would reduce the Turkish military presence on the island; it would also deprive Turkey of the right to intervene if the new arrangements broke down and with them order on the island – a right which Turkey had under the 1960 Cyprus settlement and which it exercised in 1974. Turkey

needs a stable order in Cyprus as in Iraq – not the promise of a new world order which translates itself into increased disorder. At the very least, those who press their advice on Turkey should realise that they are asking the Turks to expose themselves to considerable risks – risks to their security and to their ability to advance their material wellbeing.

The didacticism which characterises most books and commentaries on Turkey today stems from a fundamental misunderstanding – the belief that Turkey as a country, and most Turks as citizens who determine the way it is governed, do not know where their true interests lie. I can assure you that they know it better than we do.